

ADAMS, J'NAI D., Ph.D. Making Our Own Way: Exploring the Experiences of Mid-level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals Thriving at Southern Historically White Institutions. (2021)

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This phenomenological study explores mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive at southern Historically White Institutions (HWIs).

Thriving is explored through the following areas: navigation, community, and onboarding. Ten mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals with at least 5 years of professional experience took part in this study. Participants worked in various functional areas at various institutional types across five states. Critical race theory and Black feminist thought were the theoretical frameworks used to frame this study. The following research questions were answered in this study via a demographic survey, semi-structured interviews, and a media elicitation activity:

- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?
  - What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

At the conclusion of this study, the researcher found that the majority of the participants were thriving in some capacity at their institution; however, their sense of

thriving came from self-definition, community support, faith and spirituality, external resources, and onboarding conducted either by participants or onboarding they received from professional organizations or other Black womxn colleagues. A new definition of thriving emerged to capture the experiences of mid-level Black womxn accurately.

Implications and recommendations from this study impact not only creating a more inclusive and thereby supportive environment for mid-level Black womxn working in White spaces but also places accountability on HWIs and non-Black colleagues to do self-work and create actionable steps to create an environment that fosters mid-level Black womxn's ability to thrive.

*Keywords:* Black Womxn, Mid-level, Student Affairs, Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, Thriving, Historically White Institutions

MAKING OUR OWN WAY: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF MID-LEVEL  
BLACK WOMXN STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS THRIVING AT  
SOUTHERN HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To my grandmothers Janet Meador and Jane Adams, whose love, wisdom, and prayers  
have continued to cover me beyond their time on this earth.  
I pray I impact others the way you have impacted me.

## APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by J'nai D. Adams, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When the world tells you to shrink, expand. (Welteroth, 2019, p. 22)

“From the founding of American higher education in 1636, it has remained an institution that both overtly and inadvertently discriminates against African-Americans and women” (Jenifer, 2005, p. 1). This historical observation provides context to Black womxn in the student affairs work environment (Jenifer, 2005). Specifically, Black womxn face racism and sexism, which impacts their experiences as student affairs professionals at their respective institutions (Collins, 2009; Hope, 2019; Pratt-Clark, 2013; West, 2017, 2019). Hope (2019) also notes this historical context, stating, “Higher education is deeply rooted in a dominant ideology and women are often left behind in the trenches . . . it was created to prepare young White men to become ministers and government officials” (p. 21). What both Jenifer (2005) and Hope (2019) are highlighting in different ways is the issue of how Historically White Institutions (HWIs) were created for White, property-owning, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender men. These institutions built on stolen land that belonged to the Indigenous were not designed for Black womxn to exist as students, staff, or faculty.

When higher education was founded in 1636, Black womxn were enslaved and deemed chattel in the United States, which underscores the purpose and exclusive audience of these institutions. The exclusion that Black womxn faced then and now



speaks to interlocking oppressions of race and gender (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991). Cooper (2017) continues this line of thought, exploring Black womxn's "double jeopardy" (Beal, 2008, p. 166)—being both Black and womxn as she examines the lives of "race women"—Black womxn public intellectuals and activists throughout the 1900s in her text *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. From Cooper's (2017) perspective, she informs the reader that the womxn highlighted in her book found themselves advocating for Black womxn's place within race and gender issues. This fight for visibility within gender and race issues is stressed due to race issues focusing on the plight of Black men and gender issues centered around White womxn (Cooper, 2017). As a result, where can Black womxn find their place in these issues that directly impact them?

### **Statistics**

While race womxn such as Pauli Murray, Mary Church Terrell, and Fannie Barrier Williams historically highlighted the issues of Black womxn within education, class, and politics, these issues are still pertinent in the 21st century (Cooper, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in Fall 2017, 181,731 individuals worked in student and academic affairs and other higher education services; however, only approximately 11% self-identified as Black females (NCES, 2017). When reflecting on the demographic shift currently taking place in the United States and its impact on student populations at institutions that are either now or historically were predominantly White, institutional statements must be congruent with action plans. These action plans must focus on representation among faculty and staff and an overall

inclusive campus environment. According to the American Council on Education, although Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) staff has increased over the years, White individuals still represent the majority of all senior-level administrative positions (Espinosa et al., 2019).

These statistics highlight multiple dilemmas within higher education concerning Black womxn—attrition, retention, and career upward mobility—yet the problem that served as the focus of this study was mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals and the idea of thriving in the context of an HWI. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.), thriving is defined as “characterized by success or prosperity.” In literature focused on Black womxn student affairs professionals, the word thriving can hardly be found, and it is not defined.

When literature discusses “thriving,” the word is used in context to surviving and as a means of agency for Black student affairs professionals (Burke & Robinson, 2019). Therefore, for this study, I chose to define it from a holistic lens where individuals are happy and healthy emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and financially in their respective roles despite having to navigate racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression at a Historically White Institutions. I intentionally use the word holistic to reference my graduate school experience when learning about student affairs and student development that focuses on the “whole student” (Akens et al., 2019). As I explored thriving in this study, I asked participants what thriving looks like for them regarding their overall campus experiences. This question is crucial as I believe it connects mid-level experiences to the often-touted senior administrator experiences in literature around

Black womxn student affairs professionals. To understand better Black womxn who have been fortunate to move up the career ladder, it is also essential to understand if mid-level Black womxn student affairs were thriving earlier in their career in order later to have a seat at the senior administration table.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In current scholarly literature, intersectionality, critical race theory (CRT), and Black feminist thought (BFT) are theories used to interpret Black womxn's experiences in higher education (Collins, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I chose to frame this study using critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought. I chose these specific theories because I believe they are necessary theoretical frameworks that center the participants' experiences within the intersections of race and gender and provide a racialized context to the overall setting in which the participants are situated. While applicable to Black women due to its use of overlapping systems of oppression and incorporation of BIPOC womxn's experiences, intersectionality and critical race theory do not solely center Black womxn like Black feminist thought. While intersectionality is a part of Black feminist thought and was coined by Crenshaw (1991) to explain the legal circumstances of Black womxn, Black feminist thought better positions Black womxn in this study. Black feminist thought is a better framework for this study over intersectionality due to its assertion that Black womxn's experiences be deemed knowledge (Collins, 2009). However, in Chapter II, I go into more detail regarding this theoretical framework.

CRT provides context to Historically White Institutions and seeks to understand and connect the setting to Black womxn's experience navigating spaces that were not designed for them. How Black womxn have been included in the narrative of higher education, as well as the offices in which they work, can also be contextualized by CRT. Both theories support the researcher's reasoning for focusing on the experiences of Black womxn. Critical race theory allows the researcher explicitly to look at how racism informs the structure of HWIs and everyday experiences of Black womxn in student affairs. CRT "challenges Eurocentric values, such as White being normalized in the United States" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe the first tenet of CRT as "racism is ordinary . . . the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (p. 8).

Although critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) deconstructs the racialized experiences of Black womxn working at Historically White Institutions, Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) brings Black womxn from the margins of conversations on gender and race to the forefront. Black feminist thought also recognizes how Black womxn both view themselves and how society views them and the various experiences that inform Black womxn's worldview (Collins, 2009). From society's standpoint, Blackness is equated with the experiences of Black men, and womxnhood equates to the experiences of White womxn. Nonetheless, Black womxn's identity as both Black and womxn is distinctly why Black feminist thought must be used to frame this study. Additionally, Black feminist thought allows for Black womxn to incorporate other

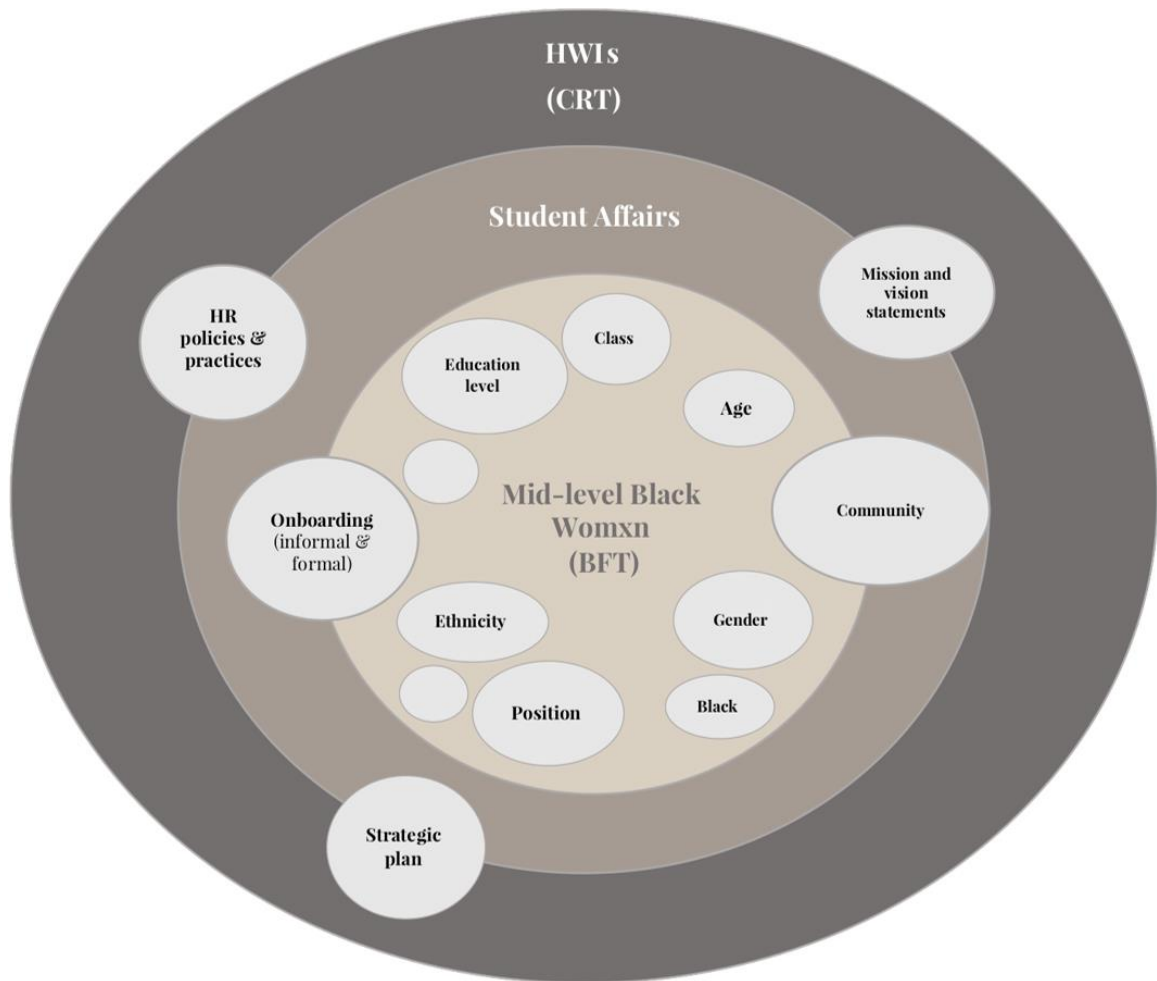
aspects of their identities and push against White notions of womxnhood and Black men's ideas of Blackness (Cooper, 2017).

This study's conceptual framework incorporates previously mentioned existing formal and informal theories based on the researcher's lived experiences as a Black womxn mid-level student affairs professional. I define informal theory as how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. Individuals' ways of knowing and understanding are informed by their world view, how they were socialized, and any unlearning that has taken place. This framework was also adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social-ecological model to design my conceptual framework for this study.

*Figure 1* (conceptual framework) illustrates how I perceive the engagement between institutional and structural racism (HWI), identity, and daily microaggressions and macroaggressions that permeate the lived experiences of Black womxn working at HWIs. In the outer layer lies Historically White Institutions as the overall setting of this study. Critical race theory is listed in parentheses after HWIs because this theoretical framework analyzes the impact of racism in the creation of these institutions and its effects on Black womxn when Black womxn were not considered during its establishment. Next, the framework shows Black womxn working in Student Affairs or a similar division at their university. Student Affairs often has its policies and ways of doing, which is why smaller circles overlap HWIs and Student Affairs, which state human resource (HR) policies and practices, the mission statement, and strategic plan. These aspects of the university inform the explicit and implicit institutional messages received by Black womxn.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Mid-Level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals' Ability to Thrive at HWIs



The innermost circle is that of Black womxn, which highlights their individual experiences. Black feminist thought is also listed in parentheses below Black womxn (center of diagram) because this is the framework used to frame Black women's experiences, and will also later be used to inform this study's methodology along with CRT. The overlapping circles between Student Affairs and Mid-level Black womxn are

onboarding and community, which are the areas of focus in understanding how Black women mid-level professionals are thriving as they navigate HWIs. These terms are defined at the end of this chapter in the terminology section. Within the Black womxn circle, a few salient identity factors are listed in smaller circles. The blank bubbles within the mid-level Black womxn circle represent other identities that may differ in saliency for various Black womxn and represent identities unnamed for available space in the diagram. However, it is important to note that the circle labeled Black represents each individual's racialization as a Black womxn. Even though participants in this study identified themselves as Black womxn, the meaning they made of their race (a social construct) and their lived experiences differed due to their positionality and understanding of their Blackness. The identities listed are based on the researcher's personal theory of what identities have influenced their experiences as a Black woman mid-level student affairs professional at an HWI. The above conceptual framework illustrates a multilayered ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in understanding the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals and their ability to thrive at their respective HWIs and was also used to guide the current study.

### **Context**

The experiences of Black womxn has been an understudied area of research in higher education. More specifically, research is even more limited when looking at the experiences of Black womxn working in student affairs. Literature around Black womxn's experiences has focused mostly on faculty, graduate and professional students,

and, more recently, undergraduate students (Apugo, 2017; Croom & Patton; 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Additionally, research that does discuss Black womxn in student affairs has only come about more steadily in the last 10 years, despite being the focus of some researchers as early as the 1980s (Mosley, 1980). Within recent years the research surrounding Black womxn in student affairs has discussed areas such as mentorship, leadership, career trajectory, isolation, community, challenges, and areas of support at HWIs (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Clayborn & Hamrick, 2007; Henry, 2010; Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Pratt-Clarke, 2013).

In recent years, the focus around the experiences of Black womxn in student affairs has shifted to the ideas of counterspaces, navigating institutions, networking, and the common theme of mentorship using intersectionality, critical race theory, and Black feminist theory to frame these experiences (Burke & Carter, 2015; Croom & Patton, 2012; Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; West 2017, 2019). This shift toward using more critical frameworks inclusive of both race and gender in articulating the experiences of Black womxn is essential to note, particularly when looking at the field of higher education and the use of developmental or constructivist theory to frame previous analyses. These older or foundational theories were created by White men studying White male-identified students (Jones & Abes, 2013). Critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality analyze individuals' experiences while critiquing systems of oppression that inform one's lived experiences due to the social identities they carry. Hence, this



study contributes to the literature on Black womxn student affairs professionals using a critical theoretical lens to shed light on the experiences of an understudied group.

### **Literature**

The focus of this study, as previously mentioned, is the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at HWIs and their ability to thrive. It is important to note that Black womxn's experiences are both raced and gendered. Additionally, to work in a field where representation is not always guaranteed on a campus that was never meant for one's existence is also necessary to note and unpack within available literature. Some literature takes on a general view of the experiences of Black womxn in student affairs without discussing in great detail racism and sexism to make meaning of participants' experiences (Burke & Carter, 2015). However, other authors take an even more critical look at Black womxn's experiences within the context of student affairs using the theoretical frameworks of Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and critical race theory, to name a few (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Hope, 2019; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2017, 2019). As previously mentioned in the section detailing the conceptual framework used, this study used both critical race theory and Black feminist thought to examine the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs at HWIs, understand the institutional context of HWIs, and Black womxn's positionality within the larger institution, in addition to smaller settings within HWIs as they attempt to thrive.

In addition to exploring the impact of both racism and sexism on Black womxn's professional experiences in student affairs at HWIs, it is worth noting that literature not

only takes on a general look at their experiences at Historically White Institutions but at the other end of the spectrum, there is literature that has a narrower view looking at specific factors such as mentorship, resilience, specific professional levels, and aspects of community (Burke & Carter, 2015; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Henry, 2010). In this section, I begin to look at what current research says as a primer for Chapter II. My focus around Black womxn's ability to thrive within student affairs at HWIs encompasses the following areas: the role of mid-level student affairs professionals, onboarding, community, navigation of one's institution, and thriving. This section not only briefly highlights the gaps found in the literature but also supports the identified problem and reasoning behind this particular study.

### **Navigation**

Pratt-Clarke's (2013) reference to the discrimination Black womxn face working in student affairs is a common theme throughout literature that centers on this particular population. Literature that does focus on racism, sexism, or the intersection between the two systems of oppression discusses how Black womxn navigate these systems at their institution as well as the impact of having to navigate these systemic barriers and what tools are needed to assist them in their navigation better. Navigation is defined as to make one's way over or through (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, the purpose of this study was to describe how Black womxn negotiate their interactions with people, policies, and settings. While recent literature discusses mentorship as one means of navigating institutions, the field of higher education, and a form of professional development, the current study focused on onboarding. Onboarding, whether informal or formal, appears in

the literature on mid-managers or mid-level student affairs professionals as training. Onboarding itself has not been discussed from the lens of Black womxn, and how it may or may not help them navigate their institutions as racial and gendered beings specifically is a gap in current literature (Belch & Strange, 1995; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Mather et al., 2009). Patitu and Hinton (2003) briefly discuss training from an informal standpoint in their recommendations to promote a more culturally competent campus community that will have a positive influence on Black womxn staff's campus experiences. Overall, the literature does not discuss training or onboarding and its impact on thriving for Black womxn in student affairs, let alone mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals.

Black womxn in student affairs encounter racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc., at their institutions and, as a result, learn how to navigate these institutions either in solitude or with the help of a network of mentors and colleagues. The fact that formal or informal training does not come up in the literature focused on the racialized and gendered experiences of Black womxn in student affairs is a gap that needs to be filled. Additionally, identity and how Black womxn navigate their identity at their respective institutions are not discussed in as much detail as is called for by Black feminist thought and critical race theory. While existing literature focuses on the experiences of Black womxn in student affairs, general themes are discussed in the findings, such as feelings of isolation, need for mentoring and community, and discrimination by colleagues (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). From my scholarly perspective, there is still a gap in the literature not having many studies exploring identity politics or

what it looks like for Black womxn to navigate HWIs holistically. Thus, the current study is poised to contribute to our understanding of thriving for this specific population.

### **Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals**

The existing literature with the target population can vary in its focus on all womxn, BIPOC womxn, or Black administrators who are both male and female-identified (Gonyea, 2019; Wheaton & Kezar, 2019). Similar to the previously mentioned lack of focus on Black womxn, some of the literature available is limited in its view of various levels within the student affairs profession. According to Belch and Strange (1995), there seems to be more research on new professionals and senior-level administrators than those at mid-level. Research is not only limited to mid-level student affairs professionals, but the labels also change between mid-level, mid-manager, or middle manager, making it at times challenging to find relevant literature. These labels contain different meanings depending on the user (Belch & Strange, 1995; Mather et al., 2009). Additionally, the research surrounding this group of professionals has not often been broken down by race or gender; literature that speaks to specific professional levels focuses on Black womxn who are either new and entry-level or senior-level administrators (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007).

Therefore, it would behoove university administrators to not only look at research focusing on mid-level professionals but specifically mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. In a predominantly White career field, with senior-level administrators especially lacking a high number of BIPOC individuals, this issue is reiterated by statistics provided by the American Council on Education. Roughly 26% of

individuals working as chief student affairs and student life officers identify as BIPOC (Espinosa et al., 2019). The implication is that this particular area of research is essential when one observes the number of senior-level administrators and sees a drastic difference in the number of Black womxn at this level compared to new and mid-level professionals.

### **Training**

For the purposes of this study, training is referred to as onboarding as I believe training makes up onboarding, but the word onboarding is not used in the literature involving Black womxn student affairs professionals. Onboarding is defined as the act or process of orienting and training a new employee (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) Therefore, onboarding from my perspective is more encompassing of informal and formal training. For example, formal training would include workshops conducted by professional offices to assist one in one's position by adding to an individual's skill set. However, informal training consists of the "hidden curriculum" that one learns as a means of navigating their institution.

Additionally, this hidden curriculum is not specific to one's position but may also support one's professional aspirations. However, for the purposes of researching current literature throughout this section, training and onboarding are used interchangeably. Literature focused on training (formal and informal) illustrates another research gap. Existing research is almost nonexistent in discussing training with Black womxn in student affairs. Formal training is only addressed in the form of professional development, which is discussed in a limited capacity (Burke & Carter, 2015; Burke &

Robinson, 2019; Hope, 2019). Professional development is defined as “enhancing personal knowledge and skills, sharing ideas and information, improving professional practices, conducting and reporting research, and participating in association activities” (NASPA, 1990, p. 3). The need for this study to explore onboarding and its relationship to thriving for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at HWIs is crucial due to the limited existing literature. Some could argue that mentorship is a form of informal training; however, the word training itself is not commonly discussed in scholarly literature but found in practitioner-based resources. The current study explored ways in which Black womxn in student affairs learn to navigate their institutions in order to thrive, whether that be opportunities to enhance their skill set as it relates to their professional role, maintain wellness, or be politically savvy for career mobility (all part of an onboarding process).

### **Community**

Researchers in recent years have also described aspects of community for Black womxn in higher education through structures such as peer relationships, networking, and centering their voices and experiences in professional development spaces solely for Black womxn, like the African American Women’s Summit (Apugo, 2017; Burke & Carter, 2015; West, 2017). Community is vital for Black womxn at HWIs when one thinks of what it means to navigate spaces where you have been historically excluded, and your presence is questioned despite having the appropriate qualifications, as described in CRT. Community creates a sense of belonging to Black womxn when HWIs

are institutional structures that were not made for them. Professional spaces that function as counterspaces is one way Black womxn can find community at their institutions.

Counterspaces, according to West (2019), is defined as “professional development opportunity intentionally designed by and for similarly situated underrepresented individuals to convene with one another in a culturally affirming environment, where the reality of their experiences are held central (West, 2017c, 5)” (p. 544). These spaces allow opportunities for Black womxn to network professionally and socially, find mentorship and community, develop as professionals, and be affirmed by other Black womxn with shared experiences. While this is an important topic to discuss related to thriving and the professional development of Black womxn in student affairs, the aspect of community itself and what it looks like at the institutions in which Black womxn work is not as heavily discussed in terms of on-campus support. Burke and Carter (2015) discuss the importance of networking for career opportunities and mentorship at professional conferences for Black womxn, again placing the focus on career attainment—networking based on career aspirations and professional development. Apugo (2017) narrows Burke and Carter’s (2015) networking focus to that of networking through peer relationships. They do not focus solely on Black womxn receiving mentoring from a person at a higher level than the participant, but the role of peer mentorship, and in particular mentorship from various areas in one’s life.

Some literature discusses networking and mentorship as previously mentioned, and the importance of peer relationships from a peer mentoring standpoint; however, there is limited literature that explores community for Black womxn as a form of feeling

connected or having a brave space where they can just be without the focus on professional development. Community can include other Black womxn or non-Black womxn; however, there is a gap in the research about campus community for Black womxn as they navigate their experiences at their institutions, particularly Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Apugo's (2017) work begins to fill in this gap outside of West's (2017, 2019) workaround counterspaces, which is also research that has come about in the last 10 years. Apugo (2017) writes about one participant who stated that they:

found a valuable core of othermothers—amazing Black womxn within and outside of the university . . . some were older and some were younger. These womxn became my family and my community. We loved each other. We helped each other. We comforted each other. We prayed for each other . . . most important, we gave each other a sacred space for our voices. (p. 153)

## **Thriving**

Literature is limited around Black womxn in student affairs and higher education regarding the concept of thriving. Instead, current literature explores Black womxn's resilience, survival, and success strategies—all of which inform the notion of thriving but does not define thriving. Patitu et al. (2003) specifically look at the resilience of Black womxn in student affairs, stating, "Although these women experienced barriers associated with racism, sexism, and homophobia, they have persisted for decades in positions that they believe are their destiny. They have survived and coped" (p. 84). In the same vein of resilience, survival is necessary, but thriving is also important to understand. It is essential that literature also includes the success stories of Black womxn



who, in spite of everything they encounter—racism, sexism, ageism, etc.—are able not just to survive but also thrive. In this study, thriving, as previously mentioned, was defined by the participants but may include components related to career mobility, acclimation, success, wellbeing, affirmation, etc.

The number of Black womxn in student affairs can be relatively low depending on one's institution, but across the board, there are fewer Black administrators than their White counterparts (Espinosa et al., 2019). It is also important to note that although there may be more mid-level Black womxn in student affairs than senior-level administrators, this does not mean some are not living their own personal definition of thriving. These womxn make the decision for themselves whether they are content staying in a mid-level position or moving up in their career. Either choice is contingent on Black womxn's ability to navigate HWIs successfully.

Belch and Strange (1995) cite that oftentimes senior administrators may judge mid-managers because they negatively interpret feelings of contentment as a lack of career ambition. As previously mentioned, not all mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals desire to move into senior administrative positions. However, they should not be dismissed because their personal and professional values do not align with White male standards of success. Belch and Strange (1995) state the importance of “reconceptualizing assumptions on middle-managers aspirations or lack of—doesn't mean they are incompetent or lack ambition—their timeline may be different” (p. 217). Literature has highlighted that for womxn, the personal and professional is considered in making career decisions in a way that men are not as cognizant (Belch & Strange, 1995).

Oftentimes literature includes senior-level administrators being reflexive in their interviews as they are perceived as having a successful career; therefore, understanding the process and what success looks like in the present time for new and mid-level professionals is also paramount. Success is hard to define for a number of reasons, with individuals' standpoint being one of them; however, for new professionals, success is hard to define because individuals are still learning how to navigate their job and institution. Apugo (2017) also discusses this notion of thriving using the terms *sustain* and *sustainability*—"the ability to endure in spite of difficulty or opposition" (p. 353). While sustainability is closer to thriving, there is still a particular focus on survival with the use of the word "endure" (Apugo, 2017, p. 353).

Although much of the research focuses on the negative experiences of Black womxn due to racism and sexism at various levels from students, faculty, and administrators, not much has been said about succeeding at Historically White Institutions, despite encounters with racism and sexism. I believe Henry's (2010) study highlights a gap in current literature around Black womxn and defining success working in student affairs. However, instead of looking at success, I aimed to define and understand through the participants' experiences what thriving looks like for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, as success is measurable based on achievement. Thriving for this study is a more holistic understanding of mid-level professional Black womxn's experiences. One can be successful by White standards and yet not feel as though one is thriving. In this study, we see mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals view thriving from a variety of lenses; therefore, this study

expands beyond defining success or analyzing what success looks like for mid-level Black womxn, but focuses on if they feel as though they are thriving and if so, what that looks like from a tangible standpoint.

### **Problem Statement**

The limited research surrounding Black womxn in student affairs, especially mid-level Black womxn in student affairs, and the previously mentioned gaps in the literature highlight the significance of studying this particular population. Furthermore, the previously mentioned dismal statistics of non-faculty Black womxn in higher education and BIPOC individuals in leadership positions at institutions again reiterate the need to not only explore but understand the experiences of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs attempting to thrive at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). The conceptual framework presented earlier in this chapter (*Figure 1*) highlights the importance of using critical race theory and Black feminist thought to extrapolate these experiences of mid-level Black womxn. With the literature stating how research and institutions have skipped over the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals in favor of new professional and senior-level administrators (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Belch & Strange, 1995), it is vital to have a full view of Black womxn's experiences in student affairs at all levels—new, mid-level, and senior administrators. This added perspective is not only significant because it highlights the challenges Black womxn face in their roles at various levels as student affairs professionals but also as a means of connecting the dots between the three groups. Seeing common themes that can inform future praxis as senior-level administrators, student affairs professionals serving on search committees,

and other relevant persons helps to reconceptualize recruitment and retention efforts of Black womxn student affairs professionals.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of how mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive in university spaces that were never designed for them (HWIs). I am interested in Black womxn's ability to thrive via their navigation of spaces as it relates to identity, onboarding (formal and informal), and sense of community. I place a particular focus on thriving as I believe it is crucial to understand what it looks like for Black womxn to actually thrive at their institutions despite the negative experiences and challenges that come with being a Black womxn in White spaces due to institutional systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. In the upcoming terminology section, thriving and other keywords are defined. It is important to note that the word thriving is later described by participants, which produces a more grounded definition found in Chapter IV findings.

### **Research Questions**

- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?

- What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

### **Significance of the Study**

The identified problem that was answered through the previously mentioned qualitative study is not only significant because this study explores an understudied subpopulation within an already understudied group, but also because this study moves beyond a broad interpretation of Black womxn's experiences in student affairs at HWIs. This study reiterates what Fey and Carpenter (1996) discuss in their research on mid-level student affairs professionals, stating,

Professional development recommendations of CAS suggest that much more data should be gathered regarding the professional development needs of mid-level student affairs administrators so that effective professional development programs can be planned. (p. 219)

It is my hope that this study not only contributes to retention and recruitment efforts but also professional development initiatives of student affairs or similar divisions. Black womxn are often the only BIPOC individual or one of the few in their offices or divisions. Understanding those experiences, particularly the needs of Black womxn in mid-level roles at HWIs, is necessary research. These initiatives are also important, as mentioned above, because the number of Black womxn in positions declines as they move up to senior-level roles.

Additionally, this study aims to push the decision-makers at HWIs to be reflexive and critically think about the experiences shared about mid-level Black womxn in student affairs and what actionable steps institutions can be taken in order to foster a more

inclusive environment for marginalized staff. When institutions' mission statements declare their goal is to have an "inclusive environment for those with marginalized identities," the question that should be asked is whether staff's experiences are included when describing an "inclusive environment." Literature has described the unfortunate experiences of Black faculty, particularly Black womxn faculty. This study expands the view of the experiences of Black womxn to include staff in addition to faculty and students. Lastly, this study is also important as it centers on the experiences of Black womxn by a Black womxn, which is explained through the upcoming positionality statement. Non-Black womxn have often relayed the experiences of Black womxn, which underscores the importance of this study (Cooper, 2017).

### **Positionality**

Apart from reflecting on the purpose of this study and the previously mentioned research questions guiding this study, it is also necessary that I exercise reflexivity and make meaning of my positionality, particularly my status as both an insider and outsider (Villenas, 1996). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) define positionality as a perspective or context in which one "recognizes where you stand in relation to others" (p. 15). What does it mean to study a particular community that shares many identities, especially two of my most salient identities (race and gender)? Subjectivity is also necessary to note as my personal identities have influenced my perspective and reasoning as to why I am looking at various aspects of Black womxn's experiences at HWIs. My positionality not only includes my race and gender but also my class, education level, religion, work position, in addition to my being a member of a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC)

sorority. Glesne (2016) discusses identities and positionings by defining identity categories such as “race, gender, age, etc.” (p. 150). Additionally, Glesne (2016) unpacks identity categories, noting that there are identity categories that are “inhabited positions” (p. 151), such as histories and contexts of a person that one has no control over, and other identities or characteristics that are achieved, such as education, class, and subjective positions that are based on one’s values.

These identities or “inhabited or achieved positions” are important when thinking about one’s positionality, which entails not only how I, as the researcher, am situated in this study but also my worldview, which is informed by my level of subjectivity. As a Black womxn with the previously mentioned identities who also serves in a mid-level student affairs professional role at a Historically White Institution, my professional and personal experiences influence my role as the researcher in addition to my decision to study individuals within similar communities. There are shared experiences that I foresee coming into focus as I go further into this study. As I engage with Black womxn who self-identify as being a part of the African Diaspora, it is also important to note that we may not share similar worldviews despite our Blackness and womxnhood connecting us.

The other identities mentioned, such as education level, class, religion, and sorority affiliation, are also necessary to note because my middle-class rearing and current lived experiences intersect with my gender and race and inform not only how I show up in spaces but how I am perceived. My sorority membership, for instance, ties to class and notions of Black womxnhood, racial uplift, and respectability politics (Cooper, 2017). Within higher education, there is a level of exclusivity that comes with being a

part of historically Black sororities or social clubs such as the Linx, Junior League, or Jack and Jill clubs. However, from my personal experiences within higher education, there are some Black womxn who belong to sororities that are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), which creates in many cases an instant shared bond between members of not only the same sorority but members of the same council.

It is due to my experiences connecting with other Black womxn while working in student affairs at a Historically White Institution that I decided to explore the experiences of my counterparts at other institutions (mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs). For this study, I examined what thriving looks like for Black womxn at HWIs from the viewpoint of identity, onboarding (informal and formal), and community. Furthermore, I chose this research focus because I believe it is important for Black womxn to see examples supported by research on Black womxn not solely focused on a deficit perspective.

### **Paradigm**

Cooper (2017) discussed the need and purpose of Black feminist thought as a means of centering the experiences and voices of Black womxn, which was the goal of this study. By incorporating Black feminist thought as well as critical race theory into this study, I am operating from a critical paradigm. I operate from a critical paradigm because I believe it is essential to unpack history as well as systems of oppression, power, and privilege to understand how this study is situated in society.

In addition to Black feminist thought, which not only centers Black womxn's experiences and voices but also critically unpacks how racism and sexism shape



specifically Black womxn's experiences in student affairs at HWIs, critical race theory delves into systems of oppression and Historically White Institutions, which are all centered around the construct of race. These two theories create a "conversation" to be had between Black womxn and HWIs.

Lincoln et al. (2011) discuss the goal of social change as a result of using a critical paradigm. Black feminist thought challenges the majority of society's way of knowing and takes Black womxn's experiences as knowledge. Critical race theory, along with its many tenets, centers race and reemphasizes Black feminist thought by incorporating intersectionality (a component of BFT) and also centering the stories of Black women that for so long have been kept in the margins (Collins, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

### **Key Terminology**

Throughout this study, there are several key terms I believe are necessary to have a mutual understanding between the researcher and the reader in how these terms are defined as well as used for the purposes of this study:

*Black*—Black will be used throughout this study and is defined as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, para. 3).

*Community*—supportive, healthy personal and professional relationships on campus (West, 2017).

*Historically White Institution (HWI)*—Institutions that are either currently or were considered a predominantly White institution ("White students account for 50% or

greater of the student enrollment”; Brown & Dancy, 2010, p. 523). These institutions “may also be understood as historically White institutions in recognition of the binarism and exclusion supported by the United States prior to 1964” (Brown & Dancy, 2010, p. 523)

*Mid-level professional*—“Represented as directors or associate or assistant directors of administrative units such as housing, student activities, judicial affairs, and orientation programs (Young, 1990)” (Mather et al., 2009, p. 244).

*Navigating*—to make one’s way over or through (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

*Onboarding*—For the purposes of this study, onboarding is defined as a form of informal/formal training that is provided to mid-level student affairs professionals to assist them in their transition either as a new employee to their office and institution as well as aid them in their position. Informal onboarding can be provided by supervisors, peers, or mentors within the office and the larger institution. Formal onboarding is typically provided by a professional organization or designated office as a means of providing professional development for mid-level professionals.

*Student Affairs*—“The work of a professional who fosters student learning, growth, and development through facilitation and support of student success” (Akens et al., 2019, p. 13).

*Thriving (participant will later define thriving for themselves)*—For the purposes of this study, I define thriving as not synonymous with surviving but indicative of happiness, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially healthy in their respective

role in spite of having to navigate racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression at a Historically White Institutions.

*Womxn*—Woman or women spelled “with an *x* acknowledges the history of exclusion in many second wave feminist organizations and to signal its welcome to all woman-identified individuals, regardless of assigned sex at birth” (UNC Womxn of Worth, 2020, “Why Womxn,” para. 1).

### **Conclusion**

This introductory chapter serves as a primer to this dissertation. This chapter answered the questions of who, what, and why about this study. In the next chapter, the literature not only supports the reasoning of this study but also provides context to the research questions previously discussed will be presented to the reader. Additionally, my positionality as a Black womxn who also serves in a mid-level professional role at a Historically White Institution is important to note as the reader continues reading this qualitative study. This study is not just important because of its focus on a typically overlooked population—Black womxn. This study is also important because it is also personal due to the researcher’s shared identities with the participants. While it is important to acknowledge the researcher’s position as an insider and outsider, which is further detailed in Chapter II, the next chapter also highlights the lack of attention that has been placed on Black womxn in student affairs, especially mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The time has come that Black women can and must no longer be passive, complacent, recipients of whatever the definitions of the sociologists, the psychologists and the psychiatrists will give to us. (Cooper, 2017, p. 113)

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals working at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Additionally, as I explored and understood the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals in the context of HWIs, I also planned to look at Black womxn's ability to thrive through their lived experiences, which includes community, onboarding (informal and formal), and navigation of their institutions (HWIs). In this chapter, I explore what current literature details about the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. In addition to exploring contemporary literature, I unpack the theoretical frameworks used to examine the previously mentioned experiences of Black womxn. To conduct this literature review, I read past empirical and conceptual studies related to this study's purpose.

Before detailing the theories and current research themes found concerning Black womxn mid-level student affairs professionals, it is essential to restate the research questions that guided this study:

- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?
  - What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

After defining the theoretical frameworks that will be discussed first, I began to explore what the literature reflects about mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs. To find what literature states around this particular topic, I looked at scholarly articles, books, and empirical studies dating from 2002 to 2017. I researched using keywords and key phrases such as “Black women administrators,” “Black women student affairs educators,” “Black women in higher education,” “student affairs,” “experiences of Black women in higher education,” “Black women in student affairs,” “Black women staff in higher education,” “Black women mid-level,” “mid-level student affairs,” “middle manager” “mid-manager,” “thriving,” “success,” and “African American women in higher education.” In changing search filters, I discovered that most of the literature focused on Black women faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students. What I could not find through a typical search engine query I found in the reference section of many of the reviewed studies to find relevant studies over the past 20 years.

In this study, thriving is analyzed from three different areas, as reflected in the three subparts of the research question—community, onboarding (informal and formal), and navigating spaces. In this literature review, I will unpack what research says around the research question and the gaps and limitations of the current literature that has informed my study.

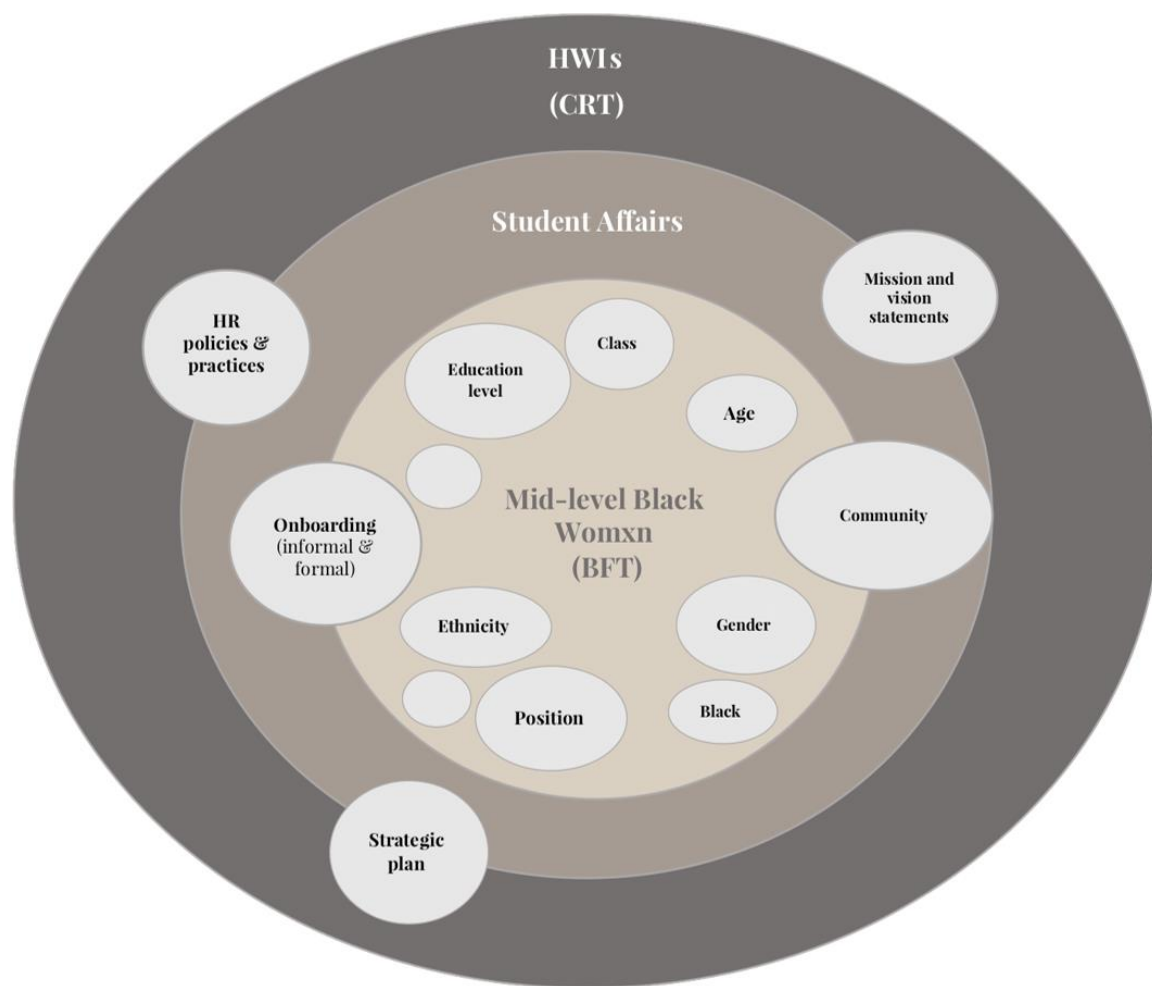
### **Conceptual Framework Revisited**

To understand the conceptual framework shared in Chapter I (*Figure 2*), the study's literature review unfolds in the order of the framework's diagram—discussing each layer of the framework by examining the theoretical frameworks and current literature that inform this study regarding the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals working and thriving at Historically White Institutions.

As *Figure 2* demonstrates, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) is used to unpack the institutional racism that is embedded within education, but specifically Historically White Institutions, which informs the experiences of mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs. Black feminist thought is used to center and analyze these experiences, which are both studied and presented from the lenses of Black womxn (Collins, 1986, 1989, 2009; Cooper, 2017).

Figure 2

Review of Conceptual Framework for Understanding Mid-Level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals' Ability to Thrive at HWIs



### Critical Race Theory

Before the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals are discussed, it is vital to bring attention to the environments in which Black womxn are working, surviving, and thriving from a micro and macro standpoint. Representation matters, and the settings in which Black womxn are working are not always affirming of

their identities. HWIs are spaces in which Black womxn were not designed to exist. These spaces were made at the expense of BIPOC communities to benefit cisgender, heterosexual, White, wealthy (property-owning), Christian male-identified individuals. Thus, it is necessary to unpack the context of what it means for Black womxn student affairs professionals to work at these institutions in their respective roles. Additionally, the southern region of the United States provides a specific context to the HWIs represented in this study. Whitaker et al. (2018) discuss this context in acknowledging the duality of the south and its connection to institutions. Whitaker et al. (2018) write:

Often romanticized as a simple honest place where front porch life and open windows greet outsiders with an Attiucs-Finch-type morality, this façade of the South is contrasted by brutal impages of slavery, racism, sexism, homophobia, and stereotypical fear of the Other. (p. 409)

The previously mentioned description of the south also speaks to the southern epistemology and a critical consciousness that one should possess to make meaning of the context of southern HWIs. Critical consciousness involves an awareness of one's positionality regarding systems of oppression (Freire et al., 2018). Critical race theory, as already indicated in the restatement of this study's conceptual framework, interrogates the history and context of the south, speaks to critical consciousness, and is used to examine HWIs and student affairs divisions. The tenets of critical race theory allow one to see the direct impact these institutions have on mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Black feminist thought, on the other hand, is used to explore the ability of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals to thrive in White spaces.



### **HWIs Through a Critical Race Lens**

Critical race theory (CRT) allows individuals to recognize the central role that race plays in our everyday lives. This particular theoretical framework challenges “Eurocentric values, such as White being normalized in the United States,” as well as assists in recognition of racism’s impact on BIPOC individuals (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5). CRT is made up of the following tenets: racism is ordinary, the importance of counterstories, the recognition of interest-convergence, race is a social construct, differential racialization, intersectionality, and anti-essentialism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Each of these tenets is defined and examined below.

Critical race theory is used as a framework in this study to center race as a foundation in the everyday lives of Black womxn in their role as mid-level student affairs professionals. Using CRT also allows one to take a critical view of the founding and operation of Historically White Institutions and their influence on how Black womxn navigate these types of institutions and their ability to thrive in the various spaces they occupy at an HWI.

Burke and Robinson (2019) underscore the reasoning behind using CRT in this study, stating, “we are positioned within the field of higher education and student affairs, which was not made for the success of Black and brown bodies” (p. 120). HWIs are rooted in White supremacy in addition to other power structures. CRT also allows the researcher to critique the institution in its treatment of Black womxn, which Black feminist thought also supports by focusing on the knowledge and lived experiences of

Black womxn. A part of Black womxn's experiences is the awareness that racism is ordinary, which CRT can be used as a dissecting tool.

### **Racism is Ordinary**

Historically White Institutions were not created for Black womxn to exist beyond the role of servitude. CRT states that "racism is ordinary," which means that racism permeates our everyday through the systems of oppression we navigate in our professional, personal, and academic lives that consist of interactions with others and enforced policies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The everyday racism on campuses like HWIs takes place on an institutional and individual level.

Individual racism "refers to an individual's racist assumptions, beliefs, or behaviors and is a form of racial discrimination that stems from conscious and unconscious, personal prejudice" (Samuels et al., 2015). Institutional racism is "a pattern of social institutions giving negative treatment to a group of people based on their race" (Samuels et al., 2015). Black womxn student affairs professionals face individual and institutional racism in their daily lives. Black womxn can encounter isolation, marginalization, and invisibility at their institutions (Hope, 2019). While individual racism is highlighted through interactions Black womxn face with other individuals, institutional racism can be identified through the human resource policies, toxic institutional culture that speaks of "fit," isolates, tokenizes, or others Black womxn. To further understand Black womxn's experiences at a Historically White Institution, one must make meaning of the environmental factors that contribute to their experiences.

Counterstorytelling, another tenet of CRT, assists BIPOC individuals in making meaning of the experiences as mentioned above.

### **Counterstorytelling**

Counterstorytelling is the centering of stories belonging to individuals with marginalized identities that have often been pushed to the margins (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). McCoy and Rodricks (2015) further define counterstorytelling as the recognition of BIPOC individuals' lived experiences (experiential knowledge) as "valued, legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001)" (p. 8). Black womxn's experiences have historically not been normalized. Okihiro's (2001) *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* speaks to a grand or "singular narrative" (p. xii) that discusses how White supremacy created the normalized standard. This status quo within higher education is challenged by CRT's tenet of counterstorytelling. It is essential that the narratives Black womxn share about their journeys in higher education are included in research and deemed as knowledge (Evans-Winters, 2019; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

### **Counterspaces**

Similar to the sharing of stories of Black womxn and BIPOC individuals, homogeneous spaces for BIPOC individuals that foster a sense of community and challenge predominantly White spaces and norms are also imperative. These spaces are known as counterspaces. Solórzano et al. (2000) define counterspaces as "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial

climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). West (2017, 2019) studied the positive impact of counterspaces on African American womxn in professional spaces such as NASPA’s African American Women’s Summit (AAWS). West (2017) declares that the purpose of their study was to explore how frequent participation in a professional counterspace like NASPA’s AAWS, which was developed by and for Black womxn student affairs administrators, helped participants “withstand their status as outsiders-within” (p. 282).

Organizations and programs such as the Carolina Black Caucus, NASPA’s African American Women’s Summit, and NASPA’s Ujima Institute provide social and professional counterspaces for Black women student affairs professionals either solely or collectively as a Black community. Solórzano et al. (2000) discuss the importance of social and academic counterspaces for Black college students. Cultural centers on campus provide space for college students. Still, from personal experience working in a cultural center and speaking with colleagues, these centers can also provide a refuge for staff (Solórzano et al., 2000). West (2017) found that counterspaces serve as a space for “identification and validation of oppressive experiences, dissemination of strategies to resist oppression, and the fortification of African American women’s standpoint” (p. 291). These themes, while specific to the needs for counterspaces, can be found in the literature that discusses Black womxn student affairs professionals (Apugo 2017; Burke & Carter, 2015; West, 2017, 2019).

As previously indicated in Chapter I, the stories of Black womxn in higher education are limited, and only in the past 10-20 years has the literature begun to

highlight the various narratives of what it means to navigate the ivory tower at multiple levels, particularly in the area of student affairs. Black feminist thought, which is discussed later in this chapter, also reiterates the tenet of counterstorytelling.

### **Interest Convergence Theory**

Interest convergence is where change that benefits BIPOC communities occur only due to the personal gain of White individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, since the enrollment of Black students at HWIs, particularly at southern institutions, the experiences of Black students have been tainted by racism (Patrick-Burns, 2020). However, it is not until students protest and donor funds are at risk due to negative publicity that we see institutional leaders finally change the name of a residence hall initially named after a racist White person, remove a confederate statue, or provide a cultural or identity center on campus for a specific student population.

Additionally, the inclusion of Black womxn in higher education in professional roles, specifically HWIs, is an example of interest-convergence. With increased BIPOC faculty and staff at Historically White Institutions, more BIPOC students enroll, which equates to an increase in institutional tuition dollars. Furthermore, an increase in BIPOC students creates an increase in diverse perspectives, campus statistics that highlight a physically diverse campus, and increased knowledge sharing regardless of whether an institution's commitment to diversity via its mission statement aligns with the actual core values of the institution (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Nonetheless, despite interests converging, the inclusion of Black womxn student affairs professionals in higher education has benefited the institution more than Black womxn themselves due to the

prevalence of issues Black womxn face in navigating these institutions whether they are seen as thriving or surviving (Apugo, 2017; Henry, 2010; Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013).

### **Labels and the Social Construction of Race**

Race, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), is “a product of social thought and relations . . . races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (p. 9). It is essential to note the impact of race as a social construct (Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solórzano et al., 2000) because race, according to Ladson-Billings (1998), while interpreted and used from a biological perspective, “has become a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic” (p. 8). Race as a social construct is defined by phenotype and has been used as a determining factor of one’s status in society and the associated assumptions. The social construction of race goes all the way back to slavery, where slaveowners used Christianity and phenotype as justification for enslaving people of African descent. This construction of race can also be observed by analyzing the options provided on birth certificates depending on county lines—some birth parents can check biracial or multiracial for children. In contrast, in other state counties, those options are not provided.

As stated in the terminology section at the end of Chapter I, for the duration of this study, the term Black is used and not African American. I intentionally use the term Black to encompass womxn who self-identify as being of the African Diaspora to be inclusive of all Black womxn. Additionally, referring back to my positionality as a mid-

level student affairs professional, the institution where I work, staff, students, and faculty who identify as Black do not all identify as African American. These individuals self-identify as mixed race, African, Afro-Latinx, or Afro-Caribbean; therefore, it was essential to bring that perspective into this study. Many studies and texts tend to focus on African American womxn and, as such, use this term over Black. Apugo (2017) and Burke and Robinson (2019) both use the term Black from a diasporic standpoint instead of making Black synonymous with African American.

Accordingly, this study focused on the experiences of Black womxn who, despite shared commonalities, may be differentiated by culture, language, and overall lived experiences, despite being perceived as African American by society. bell hooks (2015) furthered this differentiation by noting in her text *Black Looks* that Black womxn are not monolithic, stating, “It is the intensity of that struggle, the fear of failure . . . that has led many Black women thinkers especially within feminist movement, to wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience highlighted” (p. 51). She furthers this notion by stating that not all Black womxn share the same traumas and that Black womxnhood should not solely be defined by trauma as a form of developing sisterhood (hooks, 2015). These specific examples highlight the construction of race regarding Black womxn and set the tone for this study’s discussion of race connected to mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at Historically White Institutions.

## **Differential Racialization**

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) define differential racialization as the “process by which each racial and ethnic group comes to be viewed and treated differently by mainstream society” (p. 172). Within differential racialization, implicit bias is an underlying theme as individuals are all socialized to have various beliefs and values informed by their home environment, local community, education, and the media. These internalized beliefs cause us to have assumptions about others that shape how we perceive and engage others, whether we do so implicitly or explicitly. One result of differential racialization is stereotypes, “fixed images that are often negative of a particular group” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 184). Controlling images is another form of stereotypes, which is an element of Black feminist thought that is discussed in an upcoming section that defines and explores this theoretical framework. Furthermore, differential racialization can be found in the landscape of student affairs at HWIs. Black womxn student affairs professionals experience differential racialization at HWIs as they encounter systems and individuals that view Black womxn as outsiders in comparison to their White or male counterparts.

Pratt-Clarke (2013) tells of an experience as the Assistant Secretary and Compliance Officer at Vanderbilt, where she encountered exclusivity via White women gatekeepers and the old boys club. Despite having access to an exclusive space or having a seat in the room, she did not actually have a seat at the table. Pratt-Clark’s story highlights the differential treatment of Black womxn based on controlling images or stereotypes. Collins (2009) asserts that “within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies



permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable . . . certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black womxn are used to justify oppression” (p. 7). Therefore, as seen with Pratt-Clarke’s example, these biased perceptions projected onto Black womxn in student affairs, specifically mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, unfortunately, can influence their experiences at HWIs.

While Black womxn are multifaceted, the institutional racism at HWIs places Black womxn into a box regarding their professional capabilities and, as a result, negatively impacts their professional experiences. The notion of differential racialization is important to note as current research about Black womxn in higher education, especially student affairs, highlights the different ways Black womxn are treated and viewed by those who identify as Black womxn and those who do not (Gonyea, 2019; Henry, 2010; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). The previous observation also reiterates the need for more research about Black womxn by Black womxn as a means of sharing various counterstories to the White narrative surrounding education.

### **Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism**

CRT recognizes intersectionality as well as anti-essentialism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Intersectionality is the intersection of identities with overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). The lens through which Black womxn view the world is not just informed by race (Black) and gender (womxn) but also in the way racism and sexism intersect with being both Black and womxn. Therefore, Black

womxn's Blackness and womxnness cannot be separated. Jordan-Zachery (2007)

reiterates this, stating:

Sometimes my identity is like a "marble" cake, in that my Blackness is mixed intricately with my womaness and therefore cannot be separated or unlocked. In some of our analyses, we try to isolate and desegregate race and gender. How can we isolate and desegregate elements that are so intricately mixed? (p. 261)

Black womxn's experiences differ from that of Black men and White women despite sharing race and gender with the previously stated communities. Anti-essentialism is the notion that "no person has a single identity" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 10). Anti-essentialism is underscored by intersectionality as classism, cissexism, homophobia, etc., all of which shape the experiences of Black womxn and how they navigate higher education. Wheaten and Kezar (2019) further this perspective by challenging research that uses a "single-axis of oppression" (p. 62) approach to examine the leadership experiences of women in higher education. Additionally, intersectionality and anti-essentialism highlight how Black womxn's experiences differ from one person to another (hooks, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of Black womxn working as mid-level student affairs professionals also vary. While Black womxn have shared experiences of navigating racism and sexism, the various social and personal identities of Black womxn, aside from race and gender, help frame how they see the world and how they show up as professionals in the various spaces they occupy in student affairs at their respective institutions.

### **Whiteness as Property**

Whiteness as property is defined as “assumptions, privileges, and benefits” (Harris, 1995, p. 1713) associated with White individuals. This nuanced way of describing tangible White privilege in a manner that can be achieved by non-Whites—thus, “Whiteness as property,” is demonstrated through higher education, a system that was not designed for Black womxn or anyone who did not identify as a White male. Regarding Black womxn in student affairs, Whiteness as property is achieved through a college degree or beyond and the benefits of said degree (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Therefore, Black womxn student affairs professionals who typically have a master’s degree or a terminal degree and are promoted to various leadership roles or positions of influence within student affairs are all examples of Whiteness as property (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

In summary, CRT’s tenets relate to the topic of study as they not only explore how racism being ordinary is displayed in their daily lives but also how Historically White Institutions and student affairs divisions demonstrate Whiteness as property. Additionally, participants in this study had the opportunity to share their stories highlighting the tenets of interest convergence and counterstorytelling, which also shed light on stories incorporating intersectionality and anti-essentialism as Black womxn’s experiences are both gendered and racialized as well as varied. Critical race theory connects a great deal to Black feminist thought.

If CRT centers race as the point of discussion and challenging White societal norms, Black feminist thought has a similar goal, except this theoretical framework

centers on Black womxn and the knowledge acquired from their lived experiences, which distinguishes their needs as different from that of Black men and White womxn. Black feminist thought acknowledges that for Black womxn, their race and gender cannot be separated when disrupting systems of oppression and analyzing its impact on various communities. Again, CRT contextualizes the setting in which mid-level Black womxn work in reiterating how college campuses are microcosms of the real world. Following the conceptual framework, one of the settings that is necessary to make meaning of is student affairs or similar campus divisions.

### **Student Affairs**

The creation of Historically White Institutions brought about student affairs previously known as student services (Schuh et al., 2017). Student Affairs is a field that has been a part of higher education for over a century (Akens et al., 2019); therefore, the same normalized behaviors, attitudes, and ways of learning and producing knowledge are rooted in the same oppressive power structures such as White supremacy in Historically White Institutions. Strange and Banning (2015) also discuss how campus environments can have a positive or negative impact on campus community members. Although Strange and Banning (2015) focus on the student experience, it is significant to note that students and staff can have shared experiences at HWIs. Campus environments do not solely consist of the physical layout of an institution but also include the human aggregate, environmental organizational, and socially constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). All of these factors play a role in shaping the campus climate and have a direct impact on staff, particularly mid-level Black womxn's experiences.

Institutional statements such as university, divisional, and departmental mission statements and their corresponding strategic plans, when not aligned with the campus environment and overall operation of the institution, can present many challenges for Black womxn student affairs professionals. HR policies and practices can also influence Black womxn's experiences in the way they are vetted and onboarded as candidates and new employees at their respective institutions.

Patitu and Hinton (2003) discuss these issues regarding the 10 Black womxn (five staff and five faculty) participants in their study, where they discussed recommendations of making PWIs an environment that will allow Black womxn to be successful. In their recommendations, Patitu and Hinton (2003) suggest institutions demonstrate their commitment to diversity through assessment, incorporating diversity in curriculums and campus programming, and focusing on the enrollment and retention numbers of staff and faculty of marginalized identities. ACPA and NASPA's (2015) professional competency areas also serve as a guiding document for student affairs professionals and are suggested to assist HR policies and practices. While this document is not specific to Black womxn student affairs professionals, this is an example of reevaluating policies, practices, and perspectives that impact mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, which the next section discusses further.

### **Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals**

For this study, I decided to use the word mid-level to describe student affairs professionals who are considered middle management (defined in the terminology section of Chapter I) in the field of student affairs. In the existing literature, the term mid-level is

used interchangeably with the terms mid-manager and middle manager. Mid-level student affairs professionals are individuals who have a “minimum of six years of full-time professional experience supervising, maintaining budgets, and/or programming in a higher education setting” (Southern Association of College Student Affairs [SACSA], 2019, “The Mid-Level Professional Award,” para. 1). In addition to SACSA’s description, I also use Mather et al.’s (2009) working definition of mid-level, which states that individuals at this level are “directors or associate or assistant directors of administrative units such as housing, student activities, judicial affairs, and orientation programs (Young, 1990)” (p. 244). It is important to note that this level within the student affairs profession does not have a standard definition that can easily be found on the websites of national associations such as ACPA and NASPA; hence, the previously mentioned combined definition was used to create my own working definition for this study.

Another common theme is the supervision of staff for mid-level professionals. Mid-level student affairs professionals are situated in an awkward position within student affairs. They often have supervisory responsibilities over professionals yet report to senior-level administrators or another mid-level professional depending on the organizational structure of their department and division. According to Fey and Carpenter (1996), mid-level student professionals are defined as:

a) An individual who occupied a position that reported directly to the Chief Student Affairs Administrator or who occupied a position one level removed from the CSAA and b) was responsible for the Director or control of one or more student affairs functions or supervision of one or more professional staff members. (p. 220)

Belch and Strange (1995) and Adams-Dunford et al. (2019) expound upon Fey and Carpenter's (1996) understanding of mid-level student affairs professionals by discussing the lack of authority mid-level student affairs professionals have compared to senior-level administrators yet serving in a role that oversees budgets and professional staff.

Although titles are often an easy way to determine one's level within student affairs, from my personal work and educational experiences, I have noticed that position titles are not always as they seem. For instance, an individual can be the director of an office. Still, if it is a one-person office that occurs at smaller institutions or underfunded offices, this person may not supervise anyone. Furthermore, an entry-level position can be titled as an Assistant Director, whereas at my work institution in the Division of Student Affairs, entry-level positions are titled coordinators. These discrepancies make it slightly challenging to have a narrow definition for mid-level positions.

The discrepancies in having a standard definition for mid-level student affairs professionals may speak to the lack of existing literature around mid-level student affairs professionals. There is also a lack of literature related to Black womxn who identify as mid-level student affairs professionals. This is not surprising when current literature only recently has begun to grow regarding Black womxn's experiences in higher education, especially in the field of student affairs.

Literature, as well as professional development efforts, often overlook those of mid-level professionals (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Mather et al., 2009). While understanding the experiences of entry-level or new professionals is a significant contribution of literature to the field of higher education, it is also important to

increase the awareness of mid-level student affairs professionals to provide more context to the experiences of new professionals and senior-level administrators. The gap cannot be closed if, in addition to the experiences of mid-level professionals, the experiences of Black womxn in mid-level student professional roles are also not examined and added to the body of literature. In their study on the leadership experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) note the importance of studying this particular group because senior-level administrators are selected from this pool of professionals, and it is imperative to understand how Black womxn articulate their leadership experiences as mid-level professionals. This brings me to discuss specifically the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals.

### **Mid-Level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals**

In addition to highlighting leadership experiences of mid-level Black womxn, existing literature also discusses challenges related to campus politics, navigating various identities, and lack of formal and informal onboarding via professional development and institutionalized support structures. Burke and Robinson (2019) share a narrative of a mid-level professional navigating race, ethnicity (Nigerian American), and age in various spaces. However, the challenges the professional faced provided opportunities for growth. Additionally, Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) discovered that along with unpacking leadership approaches and support structures, the six participants in their study experienced some positives as well as challenges as they navigated what it meant to be in the “middle” professionally (p. 130). Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) also noted participants’ feelings of being stuck in the middle as they continued to have contact with



students but were excluded from senior-level administrators and the conversations that dictated policies that impacted the students with whom they directly worked. The irony in this particular study's findings is that the womxn identified in the study had career aspirations moving up in student affairs; yet, by being isolated in the middle, lacked the professional development needed when excluded from senior-level politics and decision-making.

Lack of professional development, while an issue for mid-level student affairs resulting in ill-prepared mid-level professionals (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019), can be detrimental to one's career but is especially harmful to Black womxn's student affairs professional careers. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) discuss participants' experiences with lack of professional support, stating, "they reported experiencing little in the way of training or grooming by their supervisors or others on campus" (pp. 133–134), which begs the question: What types of onboarding (informal or formal) do mid-level Black womxn in student affairs receive to thrive at their institution? Mather et al. (2009) highlight this lack of professional support discussing how mid-level encounters unique challenges as new employees but are often overlooked due to an institution's focus on new professionals and senior-level administrators. Patitu and Hinton (2003) push further, proposing better onboarding and institutionalized support structures as a recommendation to improve the experiences of Black womxn staff and faculty after conducting a study that examined their experiences working at PWIs.

## **Onboarding**

Professional development is an often-discussed topic, particularly for practitioners. As a graduate student enrolled in a higher education master's program, professional development was embedded throughout our program as we worked graduate assistantships, applied for required internships that garnered course credit, and took a capstone course that served as formal training for second-year students who were in the midst of searching for their first professional job. Additionally, as second-year master's students, we were also taught to inquire about professional development during interviews with prospective employers as we were taught the importance of continuous development. In the field of student affairs, professional development is imperative, with students' needs continuously changing along with policies on an institutional, state, national, and global scale. Professional development is defined as "enhancing personal knowledge and skills, sharing ideas and information, improving professional practices, conducting and reporting research, and participating in association activities" (NASPA, 1990, p. 3). While professional development includes opportunities to participate on campus committees, lead programs and initiatives, take courses, and attend professional conferences, training takes place outside of formal spaces.

Onboarding is not only crucial in providing skills that one needs to accomplish their job, but it is also necessary to assist individuals in understanding and navigating their workplace environment to have a positive holistic experience. From a practitioner lens, onboarding can be both formal and informal. Burke and Robinson (2019) reference this type of informal onboarding in a narrative about a mid-level professional, reflecting,

“Being a middle manager required me to be politically savvy and to have a strong and supportive network in the workplace” (Burke & Robinson, 2019, p. 112). Informal onboarding can consist of workshops, committees, or individual meetings that assist individuals in acclimating to the culture of a new institution or new office.

As previously mentioned, this study has a particular focus on mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Therefore, both formal and informal onboarding is imperative for Black womxn student affairs professionals. Black womxn enter HWIs already facing the barriers of racism and sexism that negatively impact their experiences as a student affairs professional.

In Chapter I, I defined onboarding as a form of training. Onboarding is defined as training that is provided to mid-level student affairs professionals to assist them in their transition as a new employee to their office and institution as well as aid them in their position. Training can either be informal (provided by supervisors or mentors within the office and larger institution) or formal (provided by a designated office as a means of providing professional development for mid-level professionals).

Enhancing one’s skill set impacts career opportunities positively, including growth in one’s role from the standpoint of career trajectory. Onboarding is also crucial as a means of knowing one’s job in the present. During my master’s program, which was a program in higher education administration, I was required to write a professional development plan that consisted of short- and long-term goals; however, this professional development plan did not focus on how I navigated spaces that were not designed for my body to enter. Neither was my acclimatization to working at an HWI as a new

professional considered in this professional development plan when my most salient identities are that of a Black womxn. The formal and informal onboarding mid-level Black womxn in student affairs receive is especially important for their professional and personal journey. Gonyea (2019) reiterates the importance of onboarding, stating, “The third most common suggestion to better support womxn in higher education leadership positions was to have more professional development for administrators, faculty, and staff” (p. 57). Gonyea (2019) further discusses the need for professional development to focus on issues in the workplace related to racism and sexism—both systems of oppression Black womxn face daily. In addition to supporting Gonyea’s (2019) recommendation for professional development programs, Hope (2019) also looks at more informal onboarding as a means of success strategies such as joining campus organizations or counterspaces as a means of networking and creating community.

### **Community**

Community, for this study, encompasses both relationships developed on and off campus by mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals that aid in their navigation of HWIs, including their ability to be successful in their role, professionally develop, and feel supported and affirmed in their various identities. Literature regarding mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at HWIs references different relationships that Black womxn develop, but “community” is not always explicitly named (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007). Instead, community can be found in literature referenced as peer relationships, mentorship, support structures, and

counterspaces (Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). Pratt-Clarke

(2013) speaks of the value of community, and the relationships developed, stating:

I found a valuable core of othermothers—amazing Black womxn within and outside of the university. Some were secretaries; some were in entry-level positions; some were managers; some were at Vanderbilt; some were in churches; and some were part of civic organizations. Some were older and some were younger. These womxn became my family and my community. We loved each other. We helped each other. We comforted each other. We prayed for each other . . . most important, we gave each other a sacred space for our voices. (p. 153)

While Pratt-Clarke (2013) and West (2017, 2019) explore community by looking at Black womxn student affairs professionals' various relationships with other Black womxn, it is also important to note that community may not always include only Black womxn when exploring what the campus and local community resemble. Pratt-Clarke (2013) acknowledges this, stating, "While it is important to make and maintain relationships with White men and womxn, as well as Black men (especially those with power) it is vital to find mothers and sisters. Mothers and sisters create a space for wisdom" (p. 153). However, much of the literature explores community from the lens of Black womxn student affairs professionals' relationships with other Black womxn. The previously mentioned quote by Pratt-Clarke (2013) highlights the importance of relationships between Black womxn and the positive impact on Black womxn student affairs professionals. The author at this moment speaks of mothering from a non-biological standpoint and sisterhood that takes place without the focus of professional development but instead a focus on emotional support (Pratt-Clarke, 2013) and how that has a positive impact on Black womxn's ability to thrive at their respective institutions.

As previously mentioned, one of the tenets of critical race theory discusses the importance of counterstorytelling—centering stories of individuals with marginalized identities that have often been pushed to the margins. West (2017, 2019) takes this notion and centers not only stories that have been centered around Whiteness or grand narratives but also professional spaces that have previously been predominantly White (Solórzano et al., 2000). Howard-Hamilton (2003) and West (2019) underscore the need for counterspaces or “culturally responsive networks” as a way to foster a professional community for Black womxn student affairs professionals. West (2017) specifically explores professional counterspaces in her work through the exploration of the African American Women’s Summit that takes place as a pre-conference institute at the annual National Association of Student Personnel Administrator (NASPA) conference. West (2019) defines counterspaces as “professional development opportunities intentionally designed by and for similarly situated underrepresented individuals to convene with one another in a culturally affirming environment, where the reality of their experiences are held central (West, 2017c, 5)” (p. 544). This professional space designated for Black womxn in student affairs working at a variety of institutional types is a space where Black womxn can support each other not only professionally but also emotionally through the summit’s intentional fostering of community and sisterhood.

West’s (2017) exploration of the role of professional counterspaces and its impact on Black womxn student affairs professionals involves the following: identification and validation of oppressive experiences, dissemination of strategies to resist oppression, and fortification of African American womxn’s standpoint. These aspects of counterspaces

again reinforce the need for community regarding Black womxn student affairs professionals. Black womxn encounter racism and sexism along with other systems of oppression depending on how intersectionality has shaped their lived experiences; therefore, it is essential to have spaces that foster a sense of belonging, especially for Black womxn working at HWIs where Black womxn may be reminded that they are deemed the “other” or outsider.

Counterspaces also provide physical space for Black womxn to commune and discuss strategies for navigating (including resisting) HWIs. These spaces also foster an affirming environment in contrast to White spaces, where Black womxn’s experiences, feelings, and perspectives can be delegitimized.

While the previously mentioned studies do not focus specifically on mid-level student affairs professionals, the inclusion of Black womxn in various professional roles highlights shared unfortunate experiences that disregard one’s professional position. From existing literature, it is clear that community is an essential aspect of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals’ experiences at HWIs. Nevertheless, throughout this study, I was interested in finding out whether mid-level Black womxn feel as though they have community on campus and, if so, what it looks like and how it developed. By having a clearer understanding of mid-level Black womxn’s community, similar to Patitu and Hinton’s (2003) recommendation, this study can better inform student affairs divisions and institutions on how to emotionally, mentally, personally, and professionally support Black womxn staff.

Throughout this chapter, the outer and middle layer of the conceptual framework diagram (*Figure 2*) has been highlighted through existing literature. In the next section, I unpack Black feminist thought in detail to provide an understanding of not only providing the reasoning for using this particular theoretical framework but how Black feminist thought centers Black womxn within the context of higher education, specifically student affairs. Again, CRT provides the context to Black womxn's experiences, but in order to have an intimate understanding of Black womxn's experiences, particularly mid-level Black womxn, their identities must be at the forefront throughout this study.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Black Feminism, as a theoretical framework, was a response to the absence of Black womxn in the feminist movements (hooks, 2015). However, Black feminist thought as a praxis began as early as the 19th century (Cooper, 2017; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Sojourner Truth, in her speech, "Ain't I a Woman," spoke to the plight of Black womxn in America and their encounters with racism and sexism, which could not be approached singularly due to Black womxn being both raced and gendered at the same time. Despite not having the language to articulate her lived experiences and work as Black feminist thought, her speech is an early iteration of Black womxn centering their bodies in the midst of race, gender, and class issues. In this section, I define Black feminist thought and connect it to the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals and CRT.



## **Standpoint**

Black feminist thought first and foremost focuses on Black womxn's standpoint (Collins, 2009). Collins (2009) states that “despite common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint” (p. 29). This notion of standpoint frames the following elements that make up Black feminist thought—self-definition, controlling images, outsider-within status, and intersectionality, or interlocking oppressions. Self-definition and self-evaluation speak to Black womxn's agency individually and collectively, defining their own narratives in opposition to societal norms, expectations, and stereotypes, also known as controlling images and deeming their experiences as knowledge (Collins, 2009). These stereotypical images Collins discusses are called controlling images, which are images that society deems representative of various Black womxn's experiences (Collins, 2009). Common controlling images include the “Black lady, mule, sapphire, mammy, etc.” Controlling images will be discussed in more detail in Chapter IV, as the elements of Black feminist thought will be used as a framework to analyze data shared by the participants.

## **Outsider-Within**

In addition to self-definition and controlling images, Black womxn are frequently positioned as the “outsider-within” (Collins, 2009, p. 13). Collins (2009) further states that the outsider-within status is “a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women's perspective” (p. 13). No place is this more evident than in HWIs and student affairs divisions. In her study on combating Black womxn student affairs

professionals' position as outsiders within, West (2017) underscores the need for increased research on Black womxn in higher education, stating, "The systemic and interconnected nature of racism and sexism coalesce to produce a marginalized experience for many African American women in higher education" (p. 297).

Furthermore, Black womxn are inherently outsiders within the field of higher education, especially at Historically White Institution, a centuries-old establishment that was not created for them.

### **Intersectionality**

Another aspect of Black feminist thought is the notion of intersectionality, which was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and used to analyze Black womxn within a legal framework. While this framework is a tenet of CRT, this tenet is also an element of Black feminist thought as it demonstrates how Black womxn's identities intersect with overlapping systems of oppression, creating their worldview. Collins (1986) discusses intersectionality using the phrase "interlocking oppressions" (p. 19). Collins defines interlocking oppressions by stating that Black womxn's experiences cannot be separated from systems of oppression—i.e., racism, sexism, and classism. Cooper (2017), also a Black feminist, discusses this same notion in her text *Beyond Respectability* as she unpacks how various Black womxn who were politically active during their time made space for themselves and other womxn who looked like them, as society did not allow Black womxn to be both raced and gendered.

### **Black Womxn's Experiences**

Cooper (2017) and Collins (2009) both discuss the plight of Black womxn not being considered in either Black or womxn's issues. Issues related to Black people tended to regard only Black men, and issues related to womxn focused on White womxn's issues. Therefore, the notion of interlocking oppressions or intersectionality is important when looking at the experiences of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs as their experiences differ from those of their White womxn and Black male counterparts. As a result, their experiences cannot be fully understood when literature combines Black womxn's experiences with Black student affairs professionals of other genders or all womxn or BIPOC womxn. While the previous research is important to the field of higher education, space featuring only the experiences of Black womxn's student affairs professionals is essential to have a true understanding of the impact student affairs have on specific marginalized groups. Furthermore, along with racism and sexism, other systems of oppression may influence the experiences of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs.

Cooper (2017) takes a more critical and inclusive look at gender and sexual orientation when discussing Pauli Murray's story. Here, Cooper (2017) examines the role of cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia in Black womxn's lives through a Black feminist thought lens. Similarly, Wheaton and Kezar (2019) and Patitu and Hinton (2003) discuss the experiences of Black womxn student affairs professionals when sexual orientation is included as a salient identity along with race and gender. Patitu and Hinton (2003) discussed a scenario from Hinton (2001) that shared the experiences of a

participant whose sexual orientation was outed without permission by a trusted colleague, which in turn created a number of professional barriers for the participant. The participant, as a result, encountered homophobia and heterosexism in addition to racism and sexism (Hinton, 2001). In researching other salient identities that inform Black womxn student affairs experiences, the previously mentioned studies were the only identified studies that discuss gender identity and sexual orientation.

In terms of relevant literature, there exist empirical studies by Black womxn focused around Black womxn in higher education at HWIs that use critical race theory and Black feminist thought (Burke & Carter, 2015; Croom & Patton, 2012; Henry & Glenn, 2009; West, 2017, 2019). On the contrary, older, more foundational theories found in higher education, specifically regarding student development, were not created with BIPOC individuals or other individuals with marginalized identities in mind (Jones & Abes, 2013). Furthermore, these foundational theories did not deconstruct systems of oppression within higher education or account for social identities such as race and gender as a means of examining the experiences of Black womxn. Henry and Glenn (2009) reference the previously mentioned theories in their article, stating, “Majority monocultural human development theories are harmful when they are used as the primary lens to understand the developmental needs and experiences of Black womxn because these theories are validated on non-Black persons” (p. 7). This quote from Henry and Glenn highlights the importance of using the chosen theories (CRT and Black feminist thought), which informed this study in contrast to theories that do not have a particular focus around race or Black womxn.

### **Black Womxn at Historically White Institutions**

Literature around Black womxn in higher education has often focused on Black faculty. Texts often revolve around “navigating the ivory tower” or academia. Croom and Patton (2012) use the metaphor of the miner’s canary to discuss the issues with Historically White Institutions and their negative impact on Black faculty. While authors have explored the experiences of professors, their observations are not specific to only professors who self-identify as Black womxn.

Guinier (2005) first used the miner’s canary metaphor in an address given during the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. In short, the miner’s canary is a story of how miners would send a canary into the mines to see if the environment was toxic. If the canary showed health issues, the miners knew that the environment was not safe and a toxic environment for them to enter. This is the metaphor Croom and Patton used to highlight the issues of Historically White Institutions. Black womxn faculty are the canaries to the mines that are HWIs (Croom & Patton, 2012). Therefore, if Black womxn are suffering at HWIs, then HWIs are by default toxic environments that need to be changed—i.e., to determine the health of an HWI, look to the experiences of Black faculty.

This metaphor, while used to examine the experiences of Black womxn full professors, can also be used to determine the quality of life of Black womxn student affairs professionals, particularly those who are mid-level. Croom and Patton (2012) observed that lack of mentoring, isolation, and burnout contributes to a toxic environment for Black womxn full professors. These same observations are found in additional

literature related to Black womxn faculty. Howard-Hamilton (2003) reiterates this observation, stating, “regarding the plight of African American womxn in higher education, it was noted that most research regarding these womxn tended to aggregate the somewhat similar experiences and opinions of African American female students, faculty, and staff” (p. 2). Therefore, the education level or professional position may change, but the same issues are prevalent among Black womxn in higher education at HWIs. Hope (2019) states, “whether employed as faculty, administrator or staff, Black womxn are confronted with countless issues related to their underrepresentation in the academy, which is also referred to in the literature as a lack of critical mass” (p. 7). Issues such as lack of mentoring, othering or tokenization, isolation, sexism, racism, etc., are unfortunately common themes concerning Black womxn’s experiences in higher education (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). As literature has explored how Black womxn navigate these issues, it is also important for literature to explore how Black womxn thrive in spite of the previously mentioned issues.

### **Thriving**

In Chapter I, I defined thriving as not merely surviving but being happy and healthy mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially in one’s respective role, despite having to navigate challenges related to racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression at Historically White Institutions. There is limited literature that specifically defines thriving in relation to Black womxn in higher education or student affairs settings. As opposed to thriving, literature explores similar narratives using the words sustainability, resilience, and success, which encompass aspects of thriving but do not solely define it

(Apugo, 2017; Burke & Robinson, 2019; Hope, 2019). For example, Apugo (2017) defines sustainability as the “ability to endure in spite of difficulty or opposition” (p. 353).

In addition to exploring sustainability or other aspects of thriving (Apugo, 2017; Burke & Robinson, 2019; Hope, 2019), Burke and Robinson (2019) specifically define thriving as “the sense of living out an unapologetic reality, which pushes us from thinking about the possibilities to acting on those possibilities. Thriving is a part of engaging in a liberatory praxis” (pp. 120–121). Burke and Robinson (2019) further depict thriving through shared professional narratives where thriving is viewed as a means of survival as well as agency. The definition of thriving, which in part will answer the research questions of this study, was determined by participants of the study as a means of providing a holistic understanding of what thriving truly means and looks like for mid-level Black womxn student affairs; however, this is just one way thriving is captured regarding BIPOC individuals in student affairs.

While this study focuses on thriving from the perspective of mid-level Black womxn, there exists some literature around senior Black womxn that looks at how they have become successful, which provides a reflexive view on thriving if thriving is to be defined partly by being successful professionally. Bower and Wolverton (2009) highlight seven Black womxn who were either currently or had served as college presidents. In the introductory chapter, Bower and Wolverton (2009) discuss the role of family, particularly parents, role models, and partners attributing to their professional success. Supportive partners and parents who have instilled in the Black womxn to go after what they want

regardless of society's limitations placed upon them due to their race and gender have influenced the Black womxn's drive and level of success (Bower & Wolverton, 2009).

Understanding what thriving looks like for mid-level Black womxn is a necessary component to understanding the experiences of Black womxn who are able to move beyond surviving. Burke and Carter (2015) state, "the higher one moves up the organizational structure, the harder it is to find womxn and People of Color (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2003)" (p. 140). Additionally, Belch and Strange (1995) discuss the judgment mid-level student affairs professionals face when they do not exhibit a perceived desire for career upward mobility. So much of existing literature studies Black womxn in student affairs once they have "made it" or have a "seat at the table" and then ask participants to be reflexive; however, what are the current experiences of womxn who either seek to attain senior-level administrator positions or who are thriving and have no desire to move up the career ladder for their own valid reasons? It is important to understand how Black womxn thrive in order to understand the evolution of thriving for Black womxn in the present (as mid-level student affairs professionals) in addition to being reflexive about earlier aspects of their career journey.

### **Gaps and Limitations**

The studies described in this chapter, many with small sample sizes, provide challenges in providing recommendations and implications to the field of higher education. The study, while important in providing information about Black womxn, does not capture a variety of experiences. While it is challenging to include sample sizes on the scale of quantitative studies in a qualitative study due to the various methods that



make up qualitative studies, the low number in sample sizes I believe could possibly perpetuate essentializing and othering because of the experiences highlighted in research is limited.

The majority of studies reviewed here are qualitative, which would have smaller sample sizes than quantitative or even mixed methods studies; however, some studies are autoethnographies highlighting the experience of one or two Black womxn or five womxn, only one of whom identifies as a Black woman (Gonyea, 2019). The low numbers may also come about due to a number of environmental factors in addition to the small number of Black womxn in student affairs across the country and in various geographic areas where these qualitative studies are taking place. This issue not only emphasizes the gaps in literature but also perhaps systemic issues as to why it may be so difficult to find Black womxn in student affairs to interview about their experiences. For instance, Henry (2010) focuses on best practices in succeeding at PWIs but only looks at three womxn (one new professional, mid-level, and senior-level administrator). Again, while the information provided is necessary to the work of understanding the experiences of Black womxn to shift higher education to become more inclusive, it is challenging not to question the reliability. How can Henry (2010) provide best practices that impact a larger group with a limited sample size? The study itself provides a gap for a future researcher to take their study and look at a larger sample size or focus on one of the levels of being a student affairs professional. Additionally, Henry's (2010) work on best practices in succeeding working at a PWI is another area with limited research.

This chapter has highlighted what current literature says about mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at Historically White Institutions. Literature has focused not only on how Black womxn navigate HWIs but has called attention to the importance of community, professional development, mentoring, and other factors that contribute to Black womxn's ability to thrive or "succeed" at their respective institutions. While the literature has increased drastically over the past 10 years with research dedicated specifically to the field of student affairs, there are still some gaps that exist related to existing literature related to this study.

As previously mentioned, literature is lacking when it comes to addressing mid-level student affairs professionals. As I identified earlier, literature, while more prominent in academic affairs (faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students), tends to focus more on new or entry-level professionals and senior-level administrators. Therefore, the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals tend to be ignored, even if unintentionally. This makes sense because senior-level administrators are viewed as having "made it," which leads to research inquiries. On the contrary, research around new and entry-level professionals also is necessary and understandable because researchers want to understand retention and the transition period between graduate students and new professionals. All of the previously discussed research is important to the field of higher education; however, what happens when professionals are in the middle and supervise the entry-level or new professionals but report to senior-level administrators? More specifically, Black womxn's experiences as mid-level student affairs professionals are also understudied, which reiterates the need for this study.

In Chapter I, I defined common terms to be used throughout the study in order for the reader to be on the same page as the researcher. The term Black is used to describe womxn who self-identify as belonging to the African diaspora. This study did not solely look at womxn who identified as African American but was inclusive of those of African descent (African American, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, African, biracial, or multiracial). Of the literature included in the literature review, the term most used is African American to describe the womxn studied. As I noted in Chapter I, this study was not limited to African Americans, as African American womxn are not the only Black womxn in higher education. Therefore, it was important to study womxn of the African Diaspora and tease out the nuances that show up in how Black womxn may identify differently in cultural terms despite identifying as the same race and how that shapes their experiences. Additionally, the majority of the literature discussed in this chapter looks at African American as opposed to Black womxn, narrowing the focus. In a similar vein, sexual orientation was also not explored. Although sexual orientation was not the primary focus of this study, I hoped that participants would feel comfortable discussing this aspect of their identity if it is salient for them and informs their ability to thrive at their institution.

Small sample sizes are another gap in the current literature. Some of the existing literature features empirical studies that feature 10 or fewer participants; however, there are other pieces of literature that feature conceptual studies highlighting a single narrative or a collection of narratives in an edited book. Additionally, some of these studies include male-identified, other BIPOC womxn, or womxn only participants in the study. Gonyea

(2019) included White womxn as it was a general study on womxn in higher education, which featured one Black womxn who also self-identified as biracial. These limited studies highlight the need for additional research on Black womxn in the field of student affairs.

The previously mentioned gaps in the literature illustrate the importance of studying mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWI institutions. Specifically, the notion of mid-level Black womxn's ability to thrive at HWIs as they navigate these institutions is incredibly important, including viewing what community and training look like for mid-level Black womxn, as literature has spoken to the importance of various aspects of community and professional development. Nonetheless, how do all of these aspects come together to shape the experiences of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs? In Chapter III, I go into great detail regarding the study's methodology, which includes a plan to have a larger sample study to exemplify diverse experiences.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Black womxn as researchers, and the researched, bring our lived realities into the research process. (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 17)

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the current study's methodology and methods implemented. The design of choice for this study was that of a qualitative study that explored the phenomenon of Black womxn thriving at HWIs. Glesne (2016) defines phenomenological research as "a methodology for researching the lived experiences of research participants . . . the focus is on how one comes to understand the world" (p. 290). Lincoln (2010) states that the goal of phenomenological inquiry is "to gain a deep understanding of some phenomenon with no mandate for prediction or control" (p. 6). To best address this study's research questions, which focused on mid-level Black womxn's experiences at HWIs from a lens of thriving, a study that allowed for open-ended responses and provided space for participants to delve deep into their lived experiences was necessary. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) define qualitative research as research that "involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials . . . that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (pp. 3–4). The research questions and purpose of the study are listed below to provide context for the decision to use phenomenology in addition to other methods in this study.

### **Research Questions**

- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?
  - What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals working at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). More specifically, the purpose of this study looked at Black womxn's experiences from a lens of the phenomenon of thriving by unpacking how they navigate HWIs overall, but also through onboarding and community. The conceptual framework for the study was described in detail in Chapter II. In addition to restating this study's research design, research questions, and purpose statement, this current chapter also details the participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and limitations. Additionally, to understand the purpose of this study, it is also useful to understand the hermeneutics and epistemology of this study.

### **Knowledge and Understanding**

Historically, knowledge has been validated as a construct created by dominant groups, which has influenced how knowledge is perceived and understood within the field of research. Ladson-Billings (2000) challenges these norms by analyzing how knowledge is constructed, stating:

The process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires active intellectual work on the part of the knower, because schools, society, and the structure and production of knowledge are designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview and knowledge productions and acquisition process. (p. 258)

These grand narratives, as addressed by Ladson-Billings (2000), Okihiro (2001), and Evans-Winters (2019), are challenged by Black feminist thought and critical race theory (Collins, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Black feminist thought specifically takes Black womxn's experiences as knowledge. Evans-Winters (2019) states, "a researcher's embracement of a Black feminist consciousness shapes . . . musings about knowledge and knowing" (p. 15). Therefore, one must be reflexive and unlearn how knowledge has been constructed within Western research's confines. For instance, education is not the only signifier of knowledge, therefore highlighting how Black womxn from all walks of life contribute to knowledge sharing via their lived experiences (Collins, 2009). CRT also challenges societal notions of what constitutes knowledge via counterstorytelling, again centering stories of BIPOC individuals who are often pushed to the margins (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These theoretical frameworks shape not only my understanding of what constitutes knowledge as the researcher but also shape how I make meaning of the

experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals attempting to thrive at HWIs. This is consistent with phenomenology in that the study puts the lived experiences of multiple mid-level Black womxn at the forefront in an attempt to describe thriving in a multifaceted way.

CRT, along with Black feminist thought, influenced the methods of this study. Both frameworks informed the demographic survey, interview protocol, and media elicitation. The analysis of these various pieces of data allowed a closer look at how embedded institutional racism is in a Historically White Institution. On the contrary, Black feminist thought brought Black womxn's experiences through the study's instruments to the forefront. The inclusion of Black feminist thought in the methods centered on the participants' (Black womxn) experiences and positioned the information shared and produced through the various methods as knowledge. This phenomenological study explored what thriving looks like for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at Historically White Institutions.

## **Paradigms**

The research questions previously stated showcase that this qualitative study took on interpretivist and critical paradigms. This study took on an interpretivist paradigm related to the use of phenomenology, which speaks to the study's purpose of understanding not only the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals but specifically what the phenomenon of thriving looks like for Black womxn in these positions at HWIs (Bhattacharya, 2017). Additionally, the critical paradigm of this study interrogated the context and systems mid-level Black womxn find



themselves working in and against through the use of CRT and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Evans-Winters, 2019). The previously mentioned frameworks are considered standpoint epistemologies used within a critical paradigm (Glesne, 2016). Standpoint epistemologies are “positioned in the experiences, values, and interests of a group that has traditionally been oppressed or excluded” (p. 11). Standpoint is also a part of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009).

These two paradigms allowed the research questions to be explored so that both paradigms make meaning of Black womxn’s experiences and critique the environments (HWIs) that attribute to those experiences. The methodical decisions of this study were also guided by the two paradigms as participants’ voices were at the forefront as they shared their lived experiences. The use of CRT and Black feminist thought allowed the researcher to make meaning of the participants’ experiences and examine the role and responsibility of HWIs in relation to mid-level Black womxn’s ability to thrive.

This study provides a greater understanding of how mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals navigate HWIs from multiple standpoints. However, more importantly, this study helps the reader understand how the phenomenon of thriving is defined from the lens of mid-level Black womxn and what it looks like for Black womxn in mid-level student affairs positions, as literature is limited on this specific demographic and subject matter.

### **Phemonenology**

As I reflected upon my standpoint, I also reflected on my decision to make this study a phenomenological study. Making meaning of the experiences of mid-level Black

womxn in student affairs at HWIs not only focuses on their navigation of their institution, but also how they are thriving, if they are thriving at all. All of this explores the multifaceted and complex lived phenomenon of thriving. Each participant had a different narrative that shaped their experiences and attributed as to whether mid-level Black womxn are thriving or not. Having this understanding shaped my decision to use critical race theory as well as Black feminist thought to guide my interview protocol, which is also shaped by my conceptual framework. The use of a demographic survey, semi-structured interview questions, and a media elicitation activity specifically helped to explore the phenomenon of thriving as I was able to see how each participant understood their experiences in context to working in White spaces not designed for them (HWIs). Additionally, the use of inductive analysis coding procedure also allowed me to determine what themes stood out as it related to understanding the phenomenon of thriving.

### **Participants**

In this study, participants were identified through purposeful sampling, where a criterion was created to intentionally choose participants that will best serve the study's purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), includes the idea of criterion-based selection, which is characterized as “making a decision on what attributes of a sample are crucial to one's study and then finding people or sites that meet those criteria” (p. 97). To effectively select participants, I reflected on my positionality (detailed in Chapter I) as a Black womxn mid-level student affairs professional who works at an HWI and the connections that have been

afforded to me. As a double outsider-insider—Black womxn working in higher education and sharing salient identities and possible experiences with participants, my network is sizable, especially in the southern region of the country, which allowed me to have greater access to participants through my relationships with various gatekeepers. Those who identified as Black, womxn, mid-level student affairs professionals, and work at HWIs represented the population I focused on for this study. Also, the decision was made after COVID-19 to sample broadly within the U.S. south, which allowed for multiple worldviews as participants represented different geographic locations, institutional types, function areas, etc.

Outreach to potential participants was accomplished through individual emails, listservs, professional organization contacts, and posting in professional social media groups. I emailed the various Black womxn in my professional circles with the recruitment script detailed later in this chapter requesting participants. Along with emailing professional contacts who I considered gatekeepers to this study's population, I emailed contacts for professional organizations and committees such as SACSA; NASPA Region III's knowledge communities; institution-based professional counterspaces such as caucuses or Black womxn's groups; and diversity, equity, and inclusion offices. Although my contact list included social media groups designated for Black professionals or specifically Black womxn student affairs professionals (e.g., Black Student Affairs Professional Facebook group), I reached my sample size before having to post on the group's page.

Once I contacted the gatekeepers mentioned earlier to gain access to potential participants, I planned to interview 10 participants, which I believed would give a more comprehensive picture of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. As I mentioned in Chapters I and II, there is very little literature on Black womxn, especially those who are also mid-level professionals, and the literature that does exist tends to have smaller sample sizes. Therefore, by having a sample size of 10 participants, the phenomenon of thriving and common related themes were amplified by the possible shared and distinctive experiences of participants who were at different institutions in different geographic locations. In the next section, I describe the respondents.

### **Participant Criteria**

To qualify to participate in the study, participants had to self-identify as Black womxn in a mid-level student affairs position working at a 4-year Historically White Institution in the U.S. South. Black, for this study, is not interchangeable with African American. Black is defined as individuals who identify as belonging to the African Diaspora (U.S. Census, 2020). Additionally, throughout this study, womxn is spelled using an *x* as a way to be inclusive of individuals of female-identified persons who may not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual or use pronouns other than *she*, *her*, and *hers*.

In Chapters I and II, student affairs was explained with the term also included in the terminology section in Chapter I. However, it is important to define mid-level again, as there are varying interpretations in the field. Mid-level, for this study, is defined as someone who is “represented as directors or associate or assistant directors of

administrative units such as housing, student activities, judicial affairs, and orientation programs (Young, 1990)” (Mather et al., 2009, p. 244). Additionally, participants must have had at least 5 years of experience, in addition to serving in one of the previously mentioned roles. The term mid-level tends to be defined more by position title and not years of experience; however, the years of experience that allows one to be considered mid-level can be found on national and regional student affairs association websites under award descriptions.

Organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Southern Association for College Student Affairs (SACSA) specify years of experiences in the qualifications listed on their websites for institutes or awards for individuals who identify as mid-level. A minimum of 5 years of experience is necessary as reflexivity is encouraged among participants. How do individuals know if they are thriving at their institution if they have a limited scope due to being new professionals and in the transition phase of becoming acclimated to their institution? Furthermore, the more experience one has, the more likely one has had to remove their rose-colored glasses, as experience has provided a more critical view of one’s institution. The longer one stays at an institution, the more one begins to see cracks in the institution’s foundation.

It is important to note that HWIs are not synonymous with PWIs but are inclusive of PWIs. I chose to look at HWIs to include institutions that were created by and for White students yet are still operationalized and led by the majority, if not all-White individuals, despite changing student demographics. Before COVID-19, I was interested

in narrowing my study to North Carolina, specifically a 2-hour east and west radius from where I lived and worked to allow for travel time. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, I cancelled the in-person focus groups. I chose not to research my work institution due to many conflicts of interest. However, having to shift my approach due to social distancing and statewide shelter-in-place policies, my study moved to a virtual platform. Therefore, I expanded my study's location to the Southern region of the United States.

My decision to examine HWIs in the South was due to the South's racialized history. While this country was founded on White supremacy, the South's roots are particularly entrenched in White supremacy, highlighting different dynamics that CRT and Black feminist thought can unpack (Collins, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2018). CRT is necessary for understanding the role the systems and structures of a Historically White Institution play in the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Along with phenomenology, Black feminist thought also framed this study through the decisions chosen regarding outreach, sampling, methods, collection of data, and analysis—Black womxn's voices, knowledge, and experiences were always centered.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The selection of participants took 3 days. I emailed 29 people from the recruitment list containing the contact information of previously mentioned gatekeepers as a starting point. I wanted to see if I could gather participants from the individuals' networks before moving on to organizations I had identified to assist with participant

recruitment. The gatekeepers forwarded the recruitment email to their personal networks, online communities, or professional organization group messaging applications to which they belonged. In 2 days, I had secured seven participants, and by the third day, I had confirmed the remaining three participants. While I confirmed the 10 participants so quickly, hundreds of potential ineligible participants had signed up for the study.

Due to my networks advertising this study to their networks or possibly the financial incentive, I received an overwhelming response rate to the demographic survey. Exactly 842 individuals responded to the demographic survey to review the informed consent form via electronic attachment. After determining the eligibility of individuals who agreed to participate, I found that 669 persons agreed to participate, and 173 individuals checked “no.” Of the 669 individuals, 17 could be vetted. The other 652 either did not complete the survey, did not provide the information requested through the survey, or were ineligible based on the information they provided. Of the 17 who were vetted, three were ineligible (lived in an excluded state, did not work in student affairs, or worked at an excluded institution), and one did not follow up to schedule the interview. Three individuals also contacted me directly (not through the recruitment form) but did not end up becoming participants.

### **Overview of Procedures**

The call for participants circulated for 3 days after which the sample size was met. Upon receiving an email from myself or via an identified gatekeeper, respondents were able to contact me via email (school address was provided in the recruitment email) to ask questions or express interest in participating in the study. While I had their direct

email addresses and names to contact, demographic information was not shared via email. All email messages were either individually directed to participants or blind copied in the case of emails that contained general information such as the sharing of a web link for the demographic survey. Upon receiving and signing the informed consent form, participants were screened using an online demographic survey via Qualtrics (*Appendix A*) to ensure that they met the study's criteria. In this way, the phenomenon of mid-level Black womxn thriving at HWIs could be foregrounded.

### **Demographic Survey**

Qualtrics is a website for password-protected assessment tool where individuals completed surveys anonymously. Information was built around a pseudonym that the participants provided. This demographic survey was distributed via a Qualtrics link in a blind-copied email to participants confirming their participation. Once surveys were completed, they were compiled into a folder, uploaded onto an online repository (UNCG Box), and deleted from the download folder on my computer. In addition to being used as a screening instrument, the survey was used as a means of data collection as this was a more efficient way to gather demographic information without taking away time dedicated to the interview and media elicitation activity.

### **Participant Follow-Up**

Interview participants were identified following the analysis of the survey data. Interviewees were then contacted via a blind-copied email with a confidential signup link to schedule two one-hour interview time slots. Participants were only able to see available slots or their own scheduled interview slots. Later, participants were confirmed

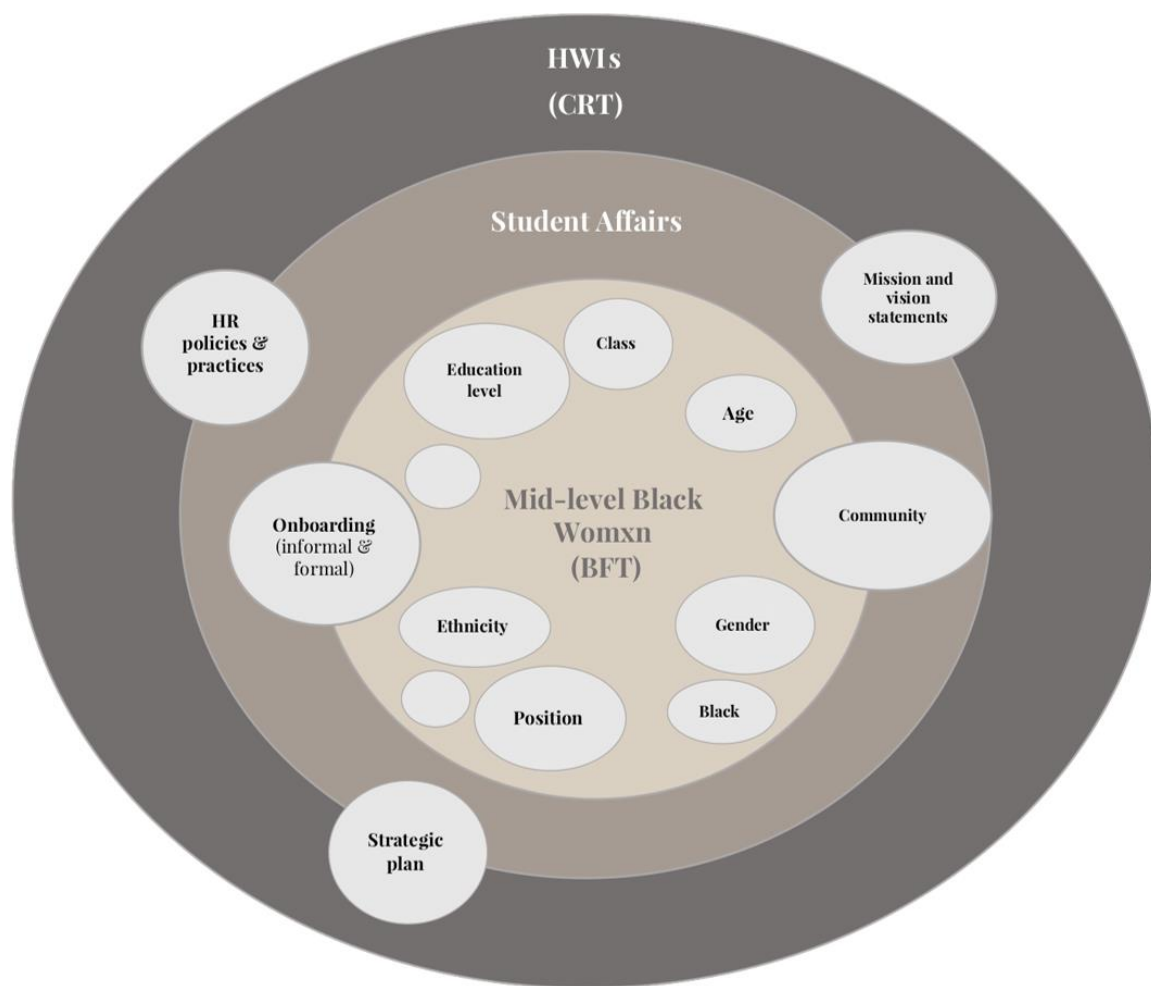


via email with a Zoom meeting link and instructions regarding the media elicitation activity (*Appendix C*). Interviewees were also sent a reminder the week of their scheduled interviews. All interviews, as mentioned in the informed consent form (*Appendix E*), were video and audio-recorded using Zoom and a digital recorder as a backup device. The three previously mentioned data sources fostered data triangulation to more fully explore the phenomenon of thriving. This offered a better understanding of how these pieces of data could converse with the original research questions. Although using multiple data sources to better understand the experiences of mid-level Black womxn thriving at HWIs, the center circle of the conceptual framework (detailed in Chapters I and II) was focused on the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn and is thus phenomenological in nature. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks shaped this study and also influenced the interview protocol.

The interview prompts, in particular, addressed the outer layer shown in *Figure 3* where HWIs provide the setting mid-level Black womxn are navigating. Despite using the outer layer as the starting point of the interview protocol, there was always a constant focus on the lived experience or phenomenon represented by the inner circle. Once the outer layer had been addressed, the questions moved to the middle layer before ending with the inner circle, where Black womxn are centered in the study. The inner circle also represents the media elicitation activity and demographic survey, focusing on identity.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Mid-Level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals' Ability to Thrive at HWIs



Once the demographic survey (*Appendix A*) was completed, participants were asked to take part in two 60-minute semi-structured interviews (*Appendix B*) that incorporated the previously mentioned media elicitation exercise (*Appendix C*) that answered this study's research questions. Before conducting interviews, participants were notified in the interview confirmation email that they were encouraged to keep the

interview confidential and to use pseudonyms not only for themselves but also when referencing their institution and individuals discussed during the interviews. During the last 20-30 minutes of the second interview, participants were asked to take part in a media elicitation activity as another source of data. I was cognizant of the amount of time being requested of participants; therefore, I asked all participants during the second interview confirmation email to come prepared with either a book, podcast, blog, etc.—some secondary source that positively impacted them and represented them in their current professional journey. The detailed prompt for the media elicitation activity can be found in *Appendix C*.

### **Media Elicitation**

This exercise, a part of qualitative inquiry, although nontraditional, placed the acquisition of knowledge outside of the classroom, which is a theme within Black feminist thought and connects to phenomenology. Bhattacharya (2017) defines elicitation as “an external trigger that provides an alternative way of knowing” (p. 52) and gives context to the experiences of participants. Examples of elicitation include photos, objects, videos, or lyrics (Bhattacharya, 2017).

From my own personal lens, some non-academic books have personally impacted my life as a mid-level Black womxn student affairs professional. These titles can be found either on social media, podcasts, blogs, magazines, or other digital spaces whose goal is to increase Black womxn’s knowledge and holistic well-being. These spaces curate list after list of books, podcasts, and websites that speak to the Black womxn reader—sometimes based on discipline, other times they are based on wellness, career

advice, etc. Additionally, the media elicitation activity was a creative way to learn more about the participants' worldview as mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Including various media types allowed participants to share knowledge outside of the traditional academic and professional development books often preferred as resources. The information gathered from this activity served as an additional perspective on the data collected in the survey and interview. This also allowed for the phenomenon of thriving to surface or be explored in many ways. The media elicitation activity also provided an opportunity to curate a database of items that can be shared as a resource to other Black womxn, not only mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. The curated media resource document is found in *Appendix C*.

### **Interview Protocol**

The various instruments previously described in this study are items that I personally created and were not adapted from other sources. The interview protocol, as I previously mentioned, is informed by the conceptual framework, which is a visual articulation of the research questions guiding this study. The interview prompts specifically explored participants' navigation of HWIs, student affairs, and the influence of community, onboarding, and identity on their lived experiences. The question about thriving was saved toward the end of the interview, which allowed the participants to have a moment of reflexivity after answering questions that spoke to the inner, middle, and outer layers of the conceptual framework. The media elicitation was a way to have participants incorporate other areas of knowledge that had positively impacted them and their overall experiences as mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at

HWIs. This activity was meant to see if the resources connect to a sense of thriving at HWIs for participants.

### **Instruments**

As I mentioned previously, the instruments were piloted before IRB approval, which I sought in order to conduct this study. Again, all interviews were audio and video-recorded via Zoom, with a digital audio-recorder as a backup. Along with the audio recorded files being kept in a folder in an online password-protected repository approved by the university, all recordings were transcribed through Temi, a transcription service that I reviewed for errors upon receipt. Transcripts were also kept in the previously mentioned online repository. Additionally, I kept an online document housed in an online repository to take notes during interviews. I also kept a journal to process my thoughts and feelings as I conducted the interviews, as I believed sharing the outsider-within status with participants as both a Black womxn in student affairs and a dual role of researcher and participant could unearth many feelings through the shared stories (Collins, 2009; West, 2017).

As I outlined above, the interviews, including the media elicitation activity, were a means of extrapolating data via the lived experiences of the participants—reemphasizing phenomenology. However, through the lens of Black feminist thought it was important to center the varied lived experiences that have often been pushed to the margins in literature. The demographic survey supplied an opportunity to provide background information on each participant, which allowed for each participant's

narrative to be highlighted individually, reiterating the constant theme that Black womxn are not monolithic despite having shared experiences (hooks, 1992).

### **Data Collection**

Black feminist thought and critical race theory challenge the majority of society's way of knowing and takes Black womxn's experiences as knowledge. Phenomenology also emphasizes the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn and their ability to thrive. In this section, I provide additional details specific to data collection for this study. Upon receiving IRB approval, I contacted individuals to share my request for participants via email or listserv who were affiliated with offices and organizations that I labeled as gatekeepers to the specific population I studied—mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at 4-year Historically White Institutions in the South. These contacts included professional organizations and their subcommittees that are professional counterspaces for BIPOC professionals, Black professionals, or specifically Black womxn; institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion offices; Black student affairs professional social media group pages; institutionally supported counterspaces for Black womxn; and Black womxn in my professional network who worked at various institutions in the Southern states listed on the consent form (*Appendix E*).

After reaching the targeted sample size (10 participants) of the interested potential participants, individuals were asked to complete an IRB-approved consent form before receiving an online demographic survey link via Qualtrics. Participants who met the criteria were invited to participate in two one-hour semi-structured interviews, which included a media elicitation activity. Once interviews were scheduled and confirmed,

interviews and the media elicitation activity were conducted via Zoom and audio/video recorded. All transcripts and notes were saved in an online repository accessible by myself and my dissertation chair. The contact sheet, as well as hard copies of the transcripts used for coding, were kept in a locked file box. Video files were deleted upon completion of interviews, and audio files were deleted upon uploading transcripts without identifiers. The uploaded transcripts will be kept for no more than 5-7 years per IRB for the use of future studies.

Once transcripts were confirmed and coded, individual narrative summaries were written for each participant and shared again with participants as a form of member checking to ensure that my interpretation of participants' stories had been accurately captured (Glesne, 2016). The media items selected for the elicitation activity were organized into a resource document and shared via a blind-copied email with participants as a means of sharing knowledge. Once transcribed, I began coding transcripts to discern the emerging themes of this study, which is discussed in the upcoming data analysis section.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all data were collected, I reviewed the interview and media elicitation notes, transcripts, media elicitation list, reflexivity journal, and survey information to pull out common themes between each piece of data. To find themes within the various pieces of data individually and collectively, I used an inductive analysis approach to analyze data, which involved determining themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). While phenomenology is the methodology that allows for themes to surface, the inductive analysis approach is the

method by which I determined which themes emerged and how often. Inductive analysis is the “process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, chunk them into small analytical units of meaning for further analysis” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). This approach allowed for a more in-depth coding process. I read transcripts, survey data, interviews, and elicitation notes multiple times and noted where specific phrases and words stood out singularly or connected to aspects of the conceptual framework or theoretical frameworks guiding this study (Bhattacharya, 2017). Additionally, in doing this, I was able to find common codes between participants’ narratives, along with common themes that appeared in the transcripts of various participants creating a theme among participants in specific functional areas or a geographic location, for example. As I made sense of the raw data, I also categorized the codes. Along with categorizing the data, I also “[looked] for silences, contradictions, and tensions” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 151).

In addition to making sense of the data, inductive analysis also calls for the researcher to be reflexive throughout the analysis process by journaling about the various processes related to coding, such as making notes, categorizing, finding patterns, etc. (Bhattacharya, 2017). To keep all data confidential, I kept an online journal in the same online repository as the transcripts to note my feelings, thoughts, observations, and general processes as I coded data. Lastly, inductive analysis also asks that I “discuss my findings with both a peer and participants” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 151). Therefore, I discussed my findings with participants through member checking via narrative summaries I typed after coding each participant’s interview transcripts as well as the final



thriving definition. In addition to analyzing data and determining the findings, it was important that I reflected on possible limitations.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the methods, criteria, and reasoning for conducting a qualitative phenomenological study. However, it is also vital that one's study illustrates validity and reliability. This study's validity and reliability are demonstrated through triangulation, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define as "making use of more than one data collection method, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories" (p. 245). As one can see, triangulation was established through the data collection methods, the use of CRT and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009; Delgado, 2017), and member checking. To further emphasize validity and reliability, the qualitative frame of trustworthiness is discussed in the next section.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness and triangulation are demonstrated through "member checks, peer review, engagement in data collection, researcher's reflexivity, audit trail, thick descriptions, and maximum variation" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Once the data were collected, media elicitation and narrative summaries were shared with participants to review and provide edits, ensuring the authenticity of their stories. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, in my dual role as the researcher and being a part of the community I studied, I was reflexive throughout this entire study to provide context to the reader and to assure the reader that I was aware of my positionality in relation to the

study. All documents used to collect data, as well as a document highlighting the data collection process, were kept securely in an online repository.

Furthermore, a piece of trustworthiness is also the rapport built between the researcher and participants—the design of the interview protocol aided in building rapport with participants through the progression of questions. Due to my positionality as a Black womxn who is also a mid-level student affairs professional at a private HWI, it is necessary to note that I am situated at the crossroads of being an insider and outsider. I was an outsider as the researcher but an insider because of my shared identity as a Black womxn student affairs professional and other identities I shared with participants. Because I do not identify with what Shirley Chisholm calls “the sociologists, the psychologists, and the psychiatrists” (as cited in Cooper, 2017, p. 133), I had access to gatekeepers and could be considered one as well due to my personal and professional networks. From an identity standpoint, I believe my trustworthiness would be questioned more if I were researching a community to which I did not belong. I would have to work twice as hard to establish my legitimacy and that my research is not a means of exploitation—however, it is also important to recognize that my identity as a Black woman does not give me an automatic entryway into all communities made up of Black womxn. Black womxn have various identities and lived experiences that inform each individual’s perception of trustworthiness.

Additionally, triangulation is critical in establishing my trustworthiness as a researcher. It was essential to have multiple sources of data to describe the phenomenon and support my analysis in answering the study’s research question. Lastly, as previously

stated, I acknowledge my positionality. My positionality and reflexivity are imperative, not only as a form of acknowledging how I am situated in my own research in context to the participants but also as a means of recognizing any blind spots that I may not have realized going into the study.

### **Reflexivity**

In Chapter II, I stated my positionality to provide context not only to the reader but also to this study. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that I share every experience or identity with every participant despite the shared commonalities that exist due to all participants identifying as Black womxn. Additionally, how my race and gender together inform my lived experiences may differ for some participants despite the study's criteria requiring that participants must identify as both Black and womxn. Their most salient identities might not be their race and gender despite self-identification. One identity that can be important to Black womxn is their sorority membership. It is not uncommon to enter professional spaces such as conferences or even within one's work institution, and many of the womxn in the room are members of a National Pan-Hellenic Council sorority. If the majority of the participants are members of an organization, this could also make the study appear biased since I am a member of a National Pan-Hellenic Council sorority. In addition to the interview and demographic survey, the media elicitation exercise is intentionally all-encompassing not to foster exclusivity, assuming that all participants engage in reading books, for example.

There are other secondary sources in addition to books that influence mid-level Black womxn's professional experiences. It is necessary to recognize all blind spots with

this data collection method, as some may use blogs or listen to podcasts as their choice of acquiring knowledge. Ladson-Billings (2000) writes:

The process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires active intellectual work on the part of the knower, because schools, society, and the structure and production of knowledge are designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview and knowledge production and acquisition process. (p. 258)

Therefore, it is imperative to question why I chose media and how I define media in order to allow for other forms of knowledge, as is framed by phenomenology and Black feminist thought (Evans-Winters, 2019). Aside from sorority membership and varied experiences and identities, many of the blind spots have previously been addressed through a discussion about gatekeepers. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, a reflection journal will allow me to continue to process any biases, emotions, and feelings that may come up for me as I continue to be reflexive regarding my standpoint.

### **Pilot Study**

I piloted my research topic through a previous qualitative class interviewing colleagues. In addition to my colleagues providing a pseudonym, I also assigned the institution a pseudonym for confidentiality. My experiences in piloting this study, even with some variation of the research and interview questions, highlighted issues I did not foresee, such as the confidential information shared with me by participants. While data collection is confidential, I did have to take time to process and make sense of what I had learned and how to then show up in spaces with people who some of the participants had discussed in detail, either directly naming or providing characteristics that made these

individuals easily identifiable based on context provided. I have foreshadowed that one of the possible challenges is because the field of higher education is a small field, especially when it comes to the BIPOC community. The circle of Black professionals and then Black womxn is even smaller. Therefore, the likelihood of knowing individuals who choose to participate or the colleagues they work with or have worked with is a strong possibility, especially within my home state. Another means of field testing as it relates to this study, is as previously mentioned, reviewing all data collection instruments with either a coding team member who may identify with the population to determine if there are any foreseeable issues with language, the order of questions, and prompts, etc.

### **Limitations**

As biases, blind spots, assumptions, and reflexivity have all been discussed. There are limitations to note due to the short time frame of this study. The time allotted for outreach and data collection is only approximately 2 months, which limits the number of participants this study could potentially have. Additionally, if the outreach and data collection period lasted 6 months, the time dedicated to data analysis would also need to be longer in order to allow enough time to transcribe and code the data of what could be a large number of hours recorded. Furthermore, this study is only looking at one region in the United States, which places limits on the data as the participants' locations may be a bit scattered about versus my original intent to only interview participants in the state where I work and am enrolled as a doctoral student. By expanding the geographic location, I extend my circle of outreach, which decreases the likelihood of me being connected to participants to some degree.

As previously mentioned, time is a limitation as I do not have the time to interview participants multiple times or over a more extended period of time to analyze participants' transition, for example, from new professionals to mid-level or mid-level to senior level. Lastly, as mentioned, COVID-19 limited the means by which I could collect data due to restrictions in most states to stop the spread of the virus. These necessary restrictions did not allow for various methods of collecting data that involved in-person data collection; therefore, the triangulation of data could be stronger if we as a country were not currently sheltering in place.

### **Reporting Data**

Once the data were collected and analyzed, the data are reported in three forms. The interviews were written as short narrative summaries which provide an overview of each participant's lived experiences, reiterating counterstorytelling. These narratives (shared in Chapter IV) not only highlight the counternarratives supported by CRT and Black feminist thought (Evans-Winters, 2019; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019) but also allows each participant's individual story to be shared in more detail to build a holistic view of the phenomenon of thriving. In addition to the summaries, the themes derived from the data will also be shared. The demographic surveys were compiled into a table for easy reading that is shared in Chapter IV, preceding the summaries and overall findings and themes. The media elicitation findings and themes are also shared in Chapter IV in a separate section; however, a chart highlighting title, author, and type can be found in *Appendix F* to serve as a resource for readers. Lastly, it is important to note again that this study explored the phenomenon of thriving for mid-level Black womxn at southern

HWIs. Making meaning of this phenomenon is understanding how participants defined thriving and determining from their reflexivity if they are thriving. In exploring the notion of thriving, a new definition emerged. Once a new definition of thriving was developed, it was shared with participants as another means of member checking (Glesne, 2016). In the next chapter, the study's results and data analysis are found.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

Predominantly White Institutions don't know how to support Black women.

—Grace

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I share the study's findings that resulted from the data analysis conducted after data collection. As I share the study's findings, I also make meaning of the phenomenon that is thriving in relation to mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). In terms of conducting the study, logistics, advertising, recruiting, and interviewing all took place during July 2020. At the conclusion of the recruitment period, I confirmed 10 participants. Upon the participants' completion of the demographic survey, I was able to review the information provided to ensure that participants met the study's criteria. Once confirmed, participants were interviewed twice. Interviews were scheduled for one hour each; however, interviews lasted between 50 and 80 minutes.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study examined mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive in HWIs—spaces that were not designed for them. The following research questions were posed to explore this phenomenon and were used to frame the findings:



- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?
  - What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

### **Findings**

This study approaches the phenomenon of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thriving by understanding how they navigate HWIs through community, onboarding, and identity. Before I share the findings in response to each research question, I first highlight the participants' demographic information via the Qualtrics survey responses (*Table 1*) and share the participants' narratives (by pseudonyms). Following the participants' narrative summaries, I discuss how participants understood their identities and then answer this study's research questions.

Table 1

## Participant Demographic Survey Results

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Age Group	Current Position Title	Years of Experience in Student Affairs	Institution Type*	Current Level of Education
Sasha	She   Her   Hers	Heterosexual	Black	33–40	First-Year Experience	12	Medium, private, liberal arts	Ph.D.
Grace	She/Her/Hers	Heterosexual	Black/ African-American	33–40	Academic Advising	17	Medium	Doctorate
Fatimah	She her hers	Cis-gendered, Heterosexual	American Negro	33–40	Religious Life	9	Medium, private, Research, Liberal Arts	Master's; current doctoral student
Sabrina	She/her/hers	Heterosexual	African American	25–32	First-Year Experience	5	Large, public, research	Current graduate student (PhD)
Michaela	She/her	Heterosexual	Black-American	33–40	Global Education	8	Medium, private, liberal arts	Master's
Sophia	She/Her/Hers	Cis-Gender Woman	Black/Biracial	33–40	Leadership	13	Large, public, research	Doctorate
Lauren (A)	She/Her/Hers	Heterosexual (straight)	African American	25–32	Student Activities	8	Medium, public	Master's
Khadijah	She, Her, Hers	Heterosexual	First-generation Haitian American	25–32	Facilities Management	8	Medium, private, liberal arts	currently pursuing doctorate
Lauren (B)	she/her/hers	Heterosexual	African American	33–40	Leadership	8	Large	Masters
Betty	she/her/hers	Heterosexual	African American	25–32	First-Year Experience	8	Medium	Part-Time Doc student

## **Participant Narratives**

### **Sasha**

Sasha works in the functional area of first-year experience and is in her third position at her work institution, having started off at the institution in housing. An office of one, Sasha has learned how to navigate her institution due to the relationships she has cultivated across campus and the community she has built. Community was modeled for her when she arrived at her institution via colleagues who assisted Sasha during her transition not only to the institution but also to the local community. Since then, Sasha has paid it forward, intentionally getting to know the new Black staff (also BIPOC staff), connecting them to other staff, mentoring young professionals, and even creating a shared document that helps new Black colleagues become acclimated to the local area. At Sasha's institution, BIPOC womxn meet monthly and are sometimes given institutional funds to assist in fostering counterspaces for Black womxn staff.

Part of Sasha's thriving has included community with other Black womxn and BIPOC womxn who hold space for one another when navigating an HWI, providing insight into the institution's culture. Over the past 11 years that Sasha has worked at her institution, Sasha has cultivated social capital through a number of relationships, acquiring a Ph.D., and becoming, as she says, a "Jack of all trades"—developing skills that fall outside of her role which has afforded her a number of professional opportunities. When asked if she is thriving, Sasha believes she is. She defines thriving as the ability to "Tap into an internal well of knowledge, balance, or joy . . . the ability to remain centered despite busy and frantic parts of the year." Additionally, COVID-19 has

provided additional space to thrive for Sasha through working from home. Working remotely has allowed a greater level of flexibility for Sasha to focus on health and wellness and incorporate the two on her terms instead of around work.

### **Grace**

When Grace participated in this study, she was still within her first year at her institution, working in an advising office designed to coordinate and oversee academic advising at her institution. Having not witnessed a full academic year before transitioning to working from home due to COVID-19, Grace is still in the process of learning the ins and outs of her institution as she attempts to navigate a new location and new institution. Prior to arriving at her current institution, Grace considered herself thriving as a mid-level professional at an HWI. She had a close-knit community on and off campus, as well as a church community, a space that is very important to her. Grace's faith (Christianity) is an identity that is most salient to her, along with her race and gender. Grace defines thriving as "the ability to be successful despite circumstances around me . . . even though everything around me is hard, it feels like I have the support system around me . . . I have resources around me. I still find joy and fulfillment in my job." When asked if she considered herself to be thriving, Grace responded no due to a lack of community and onboarding (formally and informally). Grace, like many of the participants, has had to figure everything out on her own, including how to navigate her institution. Despite not thriving, Grace's faith continues to help her navigate these difficult times.

## **Fatimah**

Fatimah works in religious life and has worked at her institution for over five years. In discussing her experiences navigating her institution, Fatimah recognizes that she was hired to fulfill a diversity quota. Knowing this information, Fatimah has chosen to turn her tokenism onto its head by getting everything she wants out of the institution as she navigates racism and sexism daily. Fatimah defines thriving as when she “has enough room and space to pull back and be mindful and to be able to see my measurements . . . even if there aren’t a lot of successes, I’m thriving when I have the ability to pause.” This notion of pausing for Fatimah is illustrated by the slower summers she is able to have due to working at an institution. Other factors that contribute to Fatimah’s ability to thrive include having her doctoral program (she is a current doctoral student) paid for by the university, a flexible work schedule, and being appropriately compensated according to her job responsibilities. Along with getting the most out of her institution, Fatimah’s navigation of her institution and ability to thrive is due to the community to which she belongs. Fatimah’s community includes various individuals across the institution, but many who identify as a Black womxn. Over the years, her community had provided an informal onboarding to the institution when she was left to figure out her role on her own. Overall, Fatimah considers herself to be thriving, although she believes “she would thrive more if she had less stress,” much of it related to racism and the context of working at a Southern institution. However, Fatimah believes she has been thriving more since charging her White colleagues to read Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*.

**Sabrina**

Sabrina works in the function area first-year experience and is an alumna of the institution where she works. Sabrina also began her student affairs career at this institution and was later promoted to a mid-level position. Because Sabrina is an alumna of her work institution, her navigation differs from many of the participants. Sabrina's journey is unique as she also previously served as a graduate assistant at her institution. Therefore, community is not something Sabrina has lacked. Her community is made up of colleagues, students, and classmates in her doctoral program. However, Sabrina acknowledged that after being promoted to her mid-level role, she did not receive formal onboarding because of the assumption that she had worked with her colleagues before. The most onboarding she received was during her transition as a new professional. On the contrary, a new colleague joined her office in a mid-level role and received a more formal onboarding.

Sabrina's identity as both Black and womxn heightened in awareness following the murder of George Floyd, where Sabrina, whose community is racially diverse, stated during one interview that she was tired of being everyone's "Black best friend." Sabrina acknowledges that oftentimes she is deemed as the "safe Black womxn" in many spaces where her White counterparts are more vulnerable with her as a result; however, there is a divide (lack of support) between older Black womxn staff and younger Black womxn staff. Additionally, Sabrina's identities as a Christian and southerner are salient to her along with her race and gender and impact how she shows up at work whether she's dealing with conflict or cultivating community. When asked to define thriving, Sabrina

responded, “when you’re happy, have purpose, and in a good place mentally.” According to Sabrina, she considers herself to be thriving but has a complicated relationship with the idea because of balancing full-time work with also being a full-time doctoral student. Sabrina feels as if she is thriving when she “feels a lot of purpose in what she’s doing and knowing that she’s helping others.” While Sabrina believes she is thriving professionally, she acknowledges her personal life has taken a back seat because of work and school. Furthermore, Sabrina views optimal thriving as having a positive impact on students; nevertheless, “thriving isn’t linear.” As she continued to discuss what it means to thrive, Sabrina reflected that thriving is not always something we realize in the moment.

**Michaela**

Recently promoted, taking on a new role in a new office (her second position at her institution), Michaela transitioned to her current institution as a mid-level professional, having left a mid-level role at a nearby HWI. At her prior institution, Michaela started off thriving only to leave due to a shift in office values, lack of support and autonomy, and a micromanaging supervisor. Despite this toxic office environment, Michaela had forged a strong community of Black womxn staff and faculty that remain connected to this day. While her last institution had a strong community of Black womxn, the institution had a retention issue when it came to Black womxn staff and faculty. At her current institution, Michaela has also connected with other Black womxn across campus, particularly those who work in her same building. Michaela works in global education and centers Black, Brown, and international student voices in her work, whether that involves study abroad experiences or course curriculums.

Michaela defines thriving as “the ability to operate out of a passion area that reinforces not only my identities but my values and belief systems.” In response to whether she is thriving or not, Michaela believes she is thriving although “not fully.” A clear set of boundaries between her professional and personal life attributes to her ability to thrive. Where Michaela sees herself not fully thriving is in the area of labor (emotional and work responsibilities), matching financial compensation, and the lack of Black and Brown students and faculty with whom she is unable to work. A world traveler who has been fortunate to travel for work, COVID-19 has put a halt on all travel. Nonetheless, Michaela also has found a silver lining with working remotely, as she is able to work in a space that is unapologetically Black (home) versus in an office at an institution that is saturated in Whiteness. While Michaela has found the positive of working from home during these uncertain times, she also reflects on what it means to walk the grounds of the HWI she works. Michaela is cognizant of the labor of Black and Brown folks that built the university and still continue to support the institution. One of Michaela’s greatest joys, she said, is being “Black as hell when walking around a university that her ancestors would have never had access to.” Nevertheless, Michaela acknowledges that she would thrive more if she were able to work with more Black staff and students, research topics centered around Black and Brown students, and if the university finally acknowledged “that it is not a great place” and take on a more active role in making the campus a better place beyond “to-do lists and renaming of streets.”



## **Sophia**

A student affairs professional with 13 years of experience, Sophia currently works in the functional area of student activities. Sophia has worked at both HBCUs and HWIs and is currently working at a large public research Historically White Institution. In reflecting upon her experience, Sophia believes she is thriving because she's "able to advance, and really make a positive impact on campus and within the profession." Acquiring social capital, including a doctorate, has also contributed to Sophia's ability to thrive as she has community within her institution as well as across other institutions. Sophie has been intentional in developing relationships with colleagues, with some relationships evolving into work collaborations as well as friendships that continue "at 5:01 pm" during the workweek. These relationships assist Sophia in navigating her institution, especially when her current institution did not effectively onboard her in her role.

To alleviate some of the lessons learned as a new employee, including finding out about additional funding 2 years after being hired, Sophia, as a supervisor, places a particular focus on onboarding her employees. An advocate for her staff, Sophia has increased the number of Black employees in her office and works to connect them to other Black colleagues across campus. The Black Faculty and Staff caucus fosters community that assists new Black staff in their navigation of an HWI. Sophia's salient identities include Black (biracial—Black and White), womxn, and being a Christian. Additionally, as a biracial womxn who identifies as Black, Sophia is also very aware of the role colorism plays in the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs

professionals highlighting how she, along with fellow colleagues, were perceived differently on the basis of their skin tone. According to Sophia, thriving as a Black womxn at an HWI means being “unapologetically authentic” in all spaces. Having a strong community has also been important in Sophia’s sense of thriving in addition to navigating her institution, a place she describes as “a beautiful campus with a broken spirit.”

### **Lauren A**

Lauren A became a mid-level student affairs professional upon arrival to her current institution working in the functional area of student activities. Since her arrival, Lauren A has been promoted (due to her own agency and call for a pay equity analysis) to a higher mid-level position, making her the highest-ranking Black womxn in her division. Although she is the highest-ranking Black womxn in her division, Lauren A points out the tokenization and isolation of having that title. On the contrary, Lauren A has been provided a number of professional opportunities because she is often the only one (Black, womxn, and youngest) in many of the spaces she occupies.

While Lauren A considers herself to be thriving due to the success she has achieved professionally at her institution, she lacks a strong community at the institution as well as the local community. Despite the lack of community at her institution, Lauren A finds community via colleagues who work at other institutions. Lauren A is also heavily involved in a national association, which allows her to continue to grow as a professional—a key factor in Lauren A’s personal definition of thriving. In learning her role and how to navigate her institution, Lauren had the good fortune of knowing the

person who previously held her position as well as taking in a number of professional development opportunities locally and nationally. Furthermore, Lauren A's vice president took an interest in Lauren A and serves as a campus mentor. Boundaries also play a role in Lauren A's ability to thrive. Since marrying and becoming a mother, Lauren A believes she has clearly defined boundaries with her staff regarding when she is able to work and when she turns work off, whether that relates to a flexible work schedule or even having the ability to bring her family to work in the evenings. While race and gender permeate Lauren A's navigation of her institution, her most salient roles are that of a mother and, most importantly, her identity as a Christian.

### **Khadijah**

Khadijah works in building operations and has been at her institution for a little over a year. While new to her institution, Khadijah has worked at both HBCU's and HWIs and specifically served in a mid-level role at an HBCU prior to her current role. As she reflected on her experiences as a mid-level Black womxn professional, Khadijah discussed the challenges she has faced navigating her institution due to lack of community at her institution as well as onboarding in addition to a difficult transition. Upon arrival, Khadijah had to rely on Black colleagues outside of her office to help with her onboarding. One of three Black staff members in her division, Khadijah's campus climate is far from welcoming. Instead, Khadijah has had to navigate campus politics that include contacting and being contacted by individuals in hierarchical order, dealing with daily microaggressions, and working with White students and staff who blatantly ignore her physical presence.

In speaking more about the disregard people have for her identity, Khadijah also shared that she felt she had not had space professionally to identify as a first-generation Haitian American due to the Black/White binary of the South that has shaped her education and professional experiences; therefore, she often self-identifies as African American and/or Black. As Khadijah learned to navigate her institution with a lack of community and onboarding, she has relied on her external community—colleagues at other institutions and professional organizations and institutions for assistance. Regarding thriving, Khadijah believes she is not thriving at her institution based on the environment she works in; however, outside of her institution regarding her professional associations and networks, Khadijah believes she is thriving. Khadijah defines thriving as “growing and developing as a person.” Her self-definition of thriving is illustrated through Khadijah’s attending numerous professional development institutes for aspiring student affairs leaders. While Khadijah views thriving holistically, she “does not believe thriving is something that can be accomplished but instead, is on a continuum.”

### **Lauren B**

Lauren B became a mid-level student affairs professional when she arrived at her current institution. Along with learning a new institution, Lauren B, who works in leadership, was also new to the surrounding area, which also informs how she defines community. Community for her includes not only her colleagues but also the integration of herself into the local community because “people stay in mid-level positions longer than entry-level.” Lauren B’s community on campus is made up of Black womxn across the institution. During Lauren B’s first 6 months, her supervisor, a White womxn,

provided her with a list of Black womxn to get to know. She understood her supervisor's actions as her way of acknowledging the role race plays for Black womxn navigating an HWI. Despite this culturally responsive action by her supervisor, Lauren B believes although her White colleagues are supportive now, they do not understand race and were not supportive prior to summer 2020.

From the lens of onboarding, Lauren B reiterates what many participants shared during their interviews—mid-level professionals are not formally trained but left to figure it out on their own. As a result, Lauren B sought formal onboarding externally through professional associations and informally through professional development opportunities across the institution, such as serving on various committees and boards. Lauren B understands thriving to be “Doing the job that she signed up for, but also thinking of unique ways on how to impact the students, faculty, and staff better than when I started.” When asked whether she considered herself to be thriving, Lauren B responded yes. However, Lauren B believes thriving is “seasonal,” stating, “at times I’ve thrived but then you know I’m definitely wanting to give up . . . getting to those low points only to reach those high points through all the trials and tribulations because I think that’s what makes it almost sweeter.” Lauren B may be thriving, but overall she believes her institution could do a better job of recruiting Black faculty and staff.

### **Betty**

Betty works in the area of first-year experience. Currently a full-time doctoral student, balancing both work and school can be challenging, which has directly impacted her personal life. Additionally, Betty has a strong sense of community. She has what she

calls her core community, which is made up of Black professionals, including colleagues in her office and a peripheral community made up of White individuals; however, when she needs advice, she leans on her core community first. Betty's community has assisted her in her navigation of the institution where she is the highest-ranking Black womxn in her division aside from an AVP. Her other Black director colleagues are all male-identified.

Regarding onboarding and her transition, Betty likens her experience to "hazing" as she believes you are only onboarded in a reactionary manner—"here's what you need to know when a situation arises." Otherwise, Betty has relied on her network to informally onboard her as she transitioned to the institution and later as she was promoted to director of a new office. A part of her experience navigating an HWI, Betty spoke of various times where her identity as a Black womxn has been policed and the impact it has had on how she shows up in spaces—being aware of tone, hair, showing up to meetings on time, etc. Despite these unfortunate scenarios, Betty considers herself to be thriving professionally. When asked to define thriving, Betty stated, "When people are thriving, they are having fun. They enjoy their work and are productive . . . producing at a level of whatever is considered successful for that area." Betty's experiences align with her definition of thriving; however, Betty also counters by posing the question, "Are Black women thriving both personally and professionally? If you're only thriving in one area. Can you really say that you're thriving in general?"

## Identity

From the conceptual framework first shared in Chapter I, mid-level Black womxn are located in the innermost circle as their identity is positioned in the center of the diagram with student affairs and the overall institution located in the outer circles, providing context to Black womxn's experiences (*Figure 4*). In the circle labeled mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, various identities are listed in small circles to represent salient identities that inform the lived experiences of participants and how they move in and out of spaces not designed with them in mind.

While race and gender would be the obvious salient identities that informed participants' ability to thrive at HWIs, other identities that mattered to participants included faith and spirituality, specifically Christianity; southern identity (what it means to work at an institution as well as having grown up in the South), age, education, first-generation college student or 1G, and being a mother. Participants found all of these identities very important to them and salient to the navigation of their institutions as well as informed their ability to thrive. Additional identities salient to participants included physical appearance (size, skin tone, and hair) and socioeconomic status. These identities have been added in the revised conceptual framework (*Figure 5*). Furthermore, the new bubble in the inner circle labeled mid-level Black womxn is critical consciousness, which I am defining as one's ability to think critically about themselves within the context of intersectionality and positionality. Critical consciousness is especially important when understanding how the participants understood being both raced and gendered, but

particularlry how they made meaning of their Blackness within the context of their position, institution, and working and living in the south.

Figure 4

Original Conceptual Framework (Pre-Study)

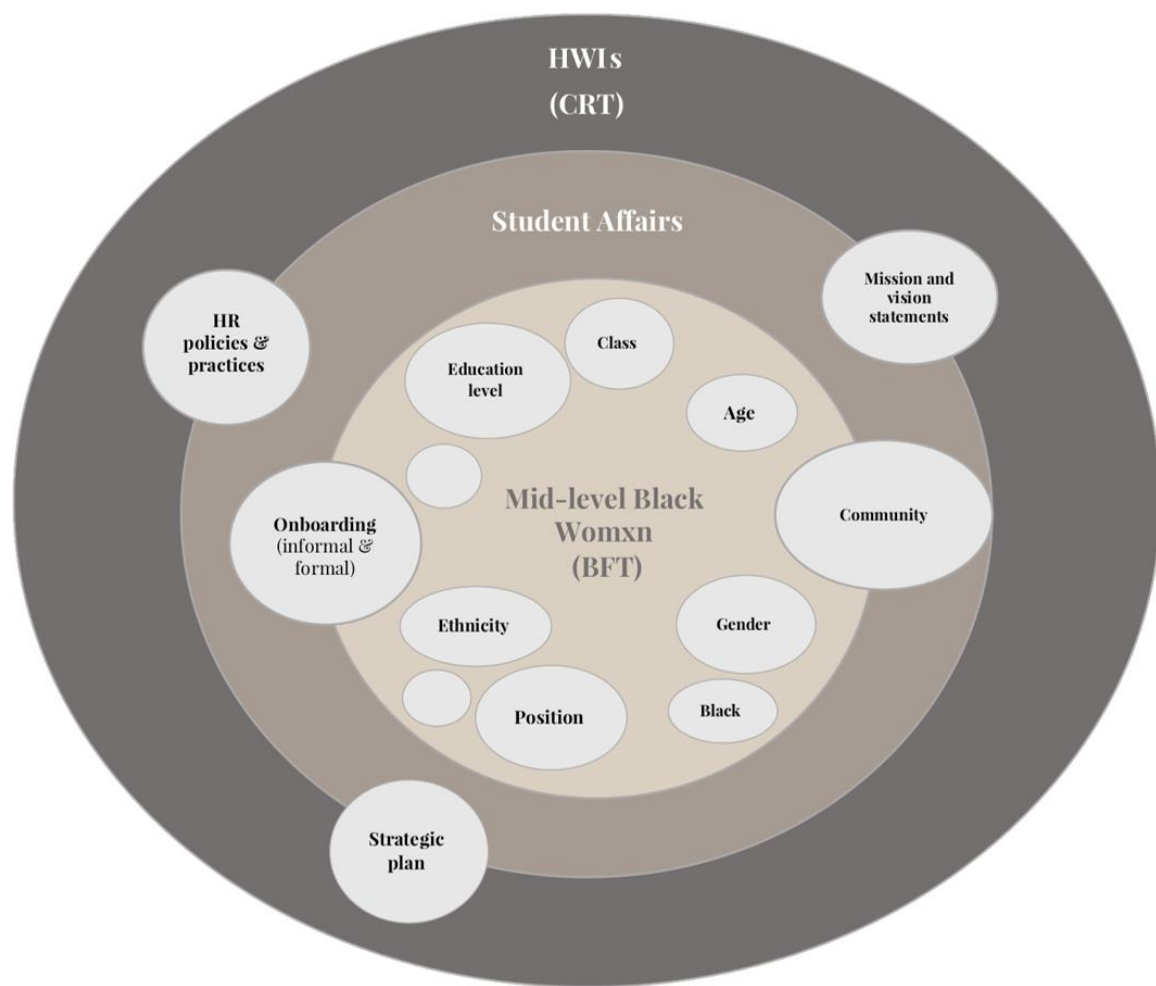
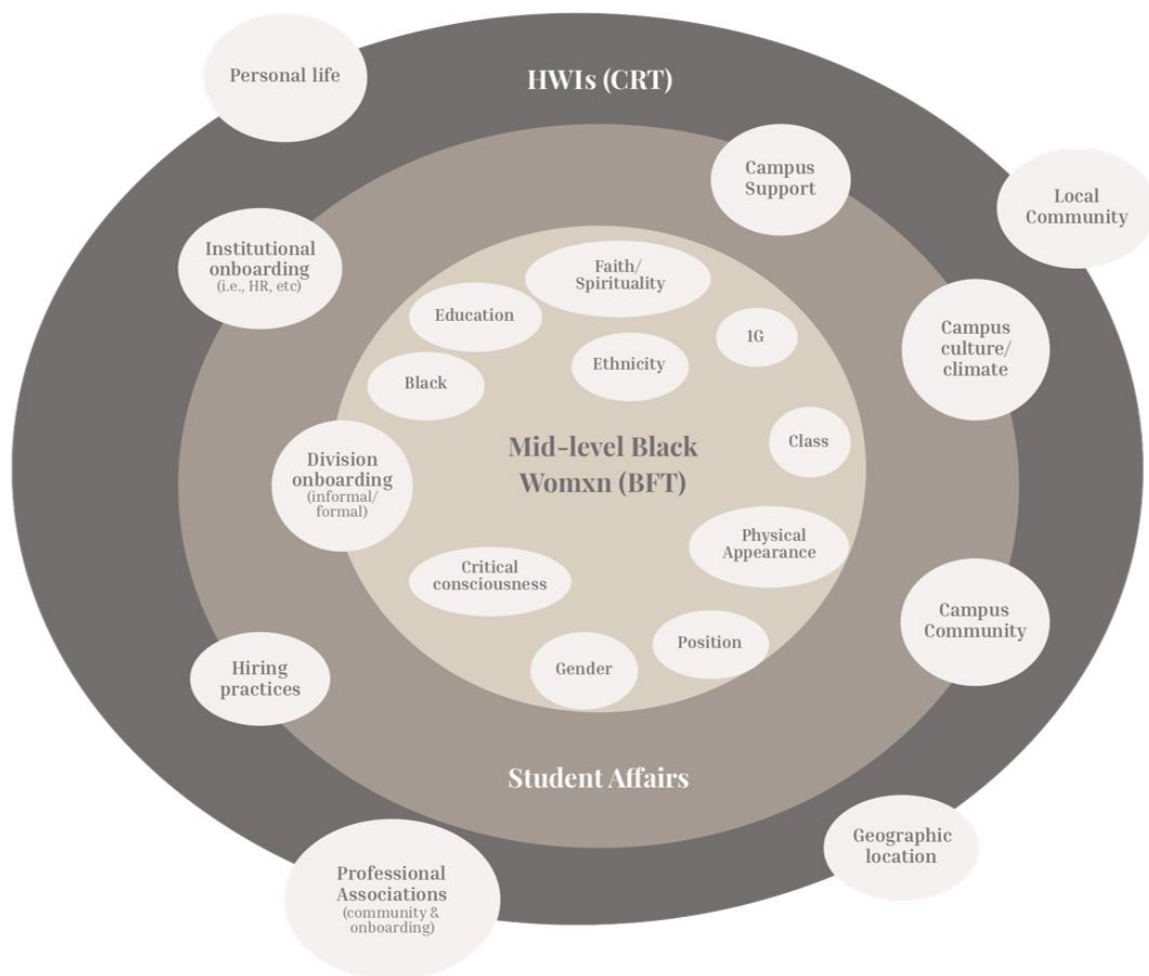




Figure 5

## Conceptual Framework (Post-Study)



After interviewing participants, I observed that there was a certain level of critical consciousness necessary for participants to make meaning of what it meant to work at an HWI as a mid-level Black womxn. Centering race and gender as they reflected on their experiences regardless of other salient identities caused a reconciliation some participants had previously engaged with and others for the first time during their interviews. For some participants, this was the first time they unpacked their professional experiences

from a raced and gendered lens within the context of an HWI. Nevertheless, to be able to truly determine whether one is thriving or not and what thriving may look like, critical consciousness is needed as it informs one's identity and how they navigate the various systems at play within institutions and student affairs divisions in addition to external communities (local community, professional organizations, and colleagues at other institutions). These identities, which will be unpacked next, all influence how participants understand thriving, navigation, community, and onboarding.

### **Faith/Spirituality**

In conversation with participants, all participants agreed that identifying as a Black womxn was an important identity; however, both Grace and Lauren A believed their identity as a Christian shaped them over their race and gender and even preceded their identity as a Black womxn. Grace relayed, “my most salient identity, even before I’m Black and a woman, is that I’m a Christian.” Grace and Lauren A discussed faith and spirituality the most in their interviews, and their faith informed how they entered spaces and engaged with others. Grace’s identity as a Black womxn shaped many if not all of the experiences she spoke of regarding her institution. Similarly, Lauren A stated,

In my lens of how I show up professionally and personally is not always like, okay, I’m Black, I’m a Black woman first, but it’s like, I’m a woman of faith. I’m a Christian . . . not that it’s not in the forefront, but I’m definitely a woman of faith first and then I’m a Black woman.

While faith for some participants informs their worldview as a mid-level Black womxn in student affairs, motherhood is another identity that was salient to some participants.

## **Motherhood**

Lauren A and Fatimah were the only participants who self-identified as mothers and wives. Both discussed how being a wife and mother informed their ability to thrive at their institution. Lauren A specifically went into great detail about her identity, more so as a mother, and how that has shifted the way she navigates her institution and the boundaries she sets between her personal and professional life. Lauren A reflected,

The fact now that I'm a mom is my most salient identity because I work in student activities. So I think, whereas before, when I didn't have a family, it was way easier for me to want to be there all the time . . . I do think that being a mom has been able to have me advocate for myself in ways that I would have never imagined . . . So like "no, I need an additional staff member"; "unfortunately, these events are gonna go unattended if it's based on me to be there" or things like, um, leave or advocating for a flexible schedule.

Lauren A's role as a mother changed the way she approached her work, whether that involved how much time she gave to her job (clear cutoff times when she needed to leave work to pick up her child) or choosing to bring her family to work events. Fatimah, on the other hand, mentioned her role as a mother when she acknowledged that time away to rejuvenate looks different now than when she was first married without children.

## **Age**

Aside from motherhood and marriage, age was another factor that informed how participants navigated various spaces. Betty, Lauren A, and Khadijah are often the youngest in the rooms they occupy, especially Lauren A and Betty, who, due to their positions, are often in rooms with more seasoned colleagues such as older directors and senior leadership. Being a young Black womxn adds another layer to their raced and

gendered experiences. When singled out by race, gender, and age, both womxn found there to be an extra level of preparation they must undergo when in spaces where they are underestimated due to their identities. Sophia, on the contrary, has more years of experience than Betty, Lauren A, and Khadijah, but because of her youthful appearance, she is often underestimated by students who assume she is much younger than she looks. Sophia also possesses a doctorate, which also shapes the navigation of her institution and how she is perceived. Along with age, education, particularly the obtainment of a terminal degree, informed how participants were treated.

### **Education**

All participants possessed a master's degree; however, three have doctoral degrees, and four participants are currently enrolled in a doctoral program. Two additional participants are in the process of figuring out the next steps regarding their education, and one participant expressed that they had no desire to go beyond a master's degree. An observation made during interviews is that those who possess doctoral degrees have had scenarios where they have had to assert their terminal degree as a means of gaining respect when detailing their interactions with faculty. For the participants with terminal degrees, they shared how they have been in spaces where faculty will address senior administrators or other faculty as "Dr." but fail to do the same or question their expertise. Sasha relayed that when she acquired a Ph.D., the degree itself began to inform her experience as a mid-level Black womxn, particularly because her reporting structure splits between student affairs and academic affairs where she has a high level of engagement with faculty. Sasha recalled,

While I don't lead with that title, there are moments in which I just have to remind folks about that . . . it's been a great asset to sort of remind folks that, Hey, friends, we have the same degree, you know, cause as you can imagine, faculty can sometimes be, um, heavy-handed in their approach with folks.

Sophia also shared a similar situation having to remind people of her degree at times.

Sophia added,

Even though I have my Ph.D., I think that people see me as the mid manager and they'll just call me Sophia versus senior-level people who are women who have their PhDs . . . I wonder if I was in the AVC [assistant or associate vice chancellor] level, would they still call me by my first name? I worked hard for this . . . I will give you permission to call me Sophia, If I say call me Sophia.

This lack of respect again is enhanced when considering participants' identities as Black womxn. Sophia further explained that she and her Black colleagues make a conscious effort to call themselves "Dr." when in a room together to assert the respect they deserve and challenge the norm of White colleagues and faculty only being referred to as "Dr."

### **Socioeconomic Status (Class)**

Socioeconomic status was also discussed, although not often by participants.

Participants discussed class mostly in relation to their education level and perceptions of the local community. For instance, Lauren A described the perception people had of her as an educated Black womxn at work. The area in which Lauren A's institution resides is made up of majority White and Latinx individuals; therefore, according to Lauren A, people are awestruck when they see an educated Black person. Lauren A remarked, "there seemed to be like a sense of awe like there's a new Black person, not there's a new person who is Black." Fatimah also mentioned the struggle she found navigating the local

community when first arriving at her institution. Fatimah, according to her understanding of the local community, found there was not a thriving Black middle-class community as she had known in the city she lived in before moving to her present location. Instead, she realized through conversations with colleagues that relationships were “the currency” at her institution, and the professional and personal lines blurred a bit because the institution is a big part of the town in which she resides. Khadijah, on the other hand, did not speak about the role of class in relation to the surrounding community but instead how her colleagues perceived her as the child of a single mother, falsely assuming she grew up in a low-income household based on the media’s stereotypical perceptions of what it means to be raised by a single Black mother. These dynamics around class influenced not only how participants were able to navigate their institution but also how they developed community, which is discussed later in the chapter.

### **Southern Identity**

The context of this study is that of Historically White Institutions located in the South. Five states are represented in this study, and while many of the participants described their institution and the role race and racism specifically played in their experience, many did not go into detail about what it meant to work at a Southern institution despite reflecting on their institution. However, the identity of growing up in the South was an identity of which some participants spoke. Sabrina was born and raised in the same state in which she was educated and now works. She even went as far as to say that being a “southern woman is her epistemology”—her way of knowing and understanding the world. Being a southern Black womxn informed how she navigated her

institution, whether that included engaging with conflict, code-switching when with her White colleagues, or handling difficult situations. Respectability politics, according to Sabrina, also influenced her southern Black womxnhood. In addition to Sabrina, Sophia also grew up in the South, which she believed provides her with a specific lens in understanding the context of what it means to work at a southern HWI as a Black womxn. Sophia shared a conversation she had this summer with a colleague about race following the death of George Floyd, telling her colleague, who was a BIPOC womxn:

Right now, what you need to understand is that Black and Brown people have been lynched. They've been hung from trees, historically in the South, they come to these campuses and they walk around and these buildings are named after White supremacists . . . So for me, it comes with its own lens. So as someone who grew up in the South and I had seen it over and over and over I understand what it means to live in the South, and you can't come here, say that you truly understand when you have never lived here.

Sophia further stated that as a mid-level student affairs professional, she no longer has blinders on and recognizes her institution's ties to racism and sexism.

### **Physical Appearance**

Physical appearance was a less common but important theme discussed during participant's interviews. Hair was briefly discussed during a few participants' interviews. Sabrina, Betty, and Michaela all briefly mentioned how they have navigated their hair choices and for Betty and Michaela, specifically choosing to be unapologetic about wearing their hair in a natural style or headwrap as opposed to abiding by Eurocentric beauty standard. Sabrina also mentioned hair through the lens of working from home due to COVID-19 and being late to a meeting because of her hair being wrapped (hairstyling

method used to preserve straightened hair) and having to comb her hair out of the wrapped style to get on a zoom with a White colleague. While these memories about hair politics were discussed briefly, one cannot ignore the role Black hair has played in not only mid-level Black womxn's student affairs professionals' work experiences but also any Black womxn in the workplace (Crown Act, 2020).

Height and skin tone were also factors that informed participants' experiences. For Khadijah, who is under 5 feet tall, she believes she has to assert her presence in spaces because most of her colleagues are significantly taller than her and take up more physical space. However, her lack of height, which contributes to her physical stature, is only emphasized by being the only Black person in her building and oftentimes the spaces she occupies. While Khadijah was the only participant who mentioned size or specifically height, I noticed that skin tone, particularly colorism, seemed to inform participants' experiences, with one participant confirming it during her interview.

Sophia, who discussed at length the role colorism played in her life, mentioned how as a Black womxn who also identified as biracial and has a fair complexion, is privileged in many ways over her colleagues who have more melanin because she is seen as less of a threat to White individuals. Sophia even discussed how she has had to defend a colleague with a deeper complexion than hers to another colleague who mistreated the former. Moreover, I observed that while most participants discussed the trope of the angry Black womxn being projected onto them at some point in their career as a mid-level student affairs professional, those who had more melanin tended to talk a great deal more about their experiences with identity politics whether that involved being tone



policed by White colleagues or being more cognizant of their actions, which caused them to code-switch more or defend their actions to make White colleagues comfortable.

As I conclude this section on identity, I must note the importance of providing context to the demographics of the participants, as the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter I highlights the importance of identity in the inner circle. In Chapter I, I made meaning of my positionality in relation to this study; therefore, it is important to make meaning of participants' positionality as they have different contexts that shape answering this study's research questions. This is also demonstrated through the new circle in the post-study version of the conceptual framework labeled critical consciousness, which was discussed in Chapter II. Nevertheless, the central point of the coding was to describe the phenomena of thriving through the lens of navigating, creating community, and receiving professional onboarding, per the research questions, which are presented next.

### **Research Question Responses**

#### **What Does Community Look Like for Mid-Level Black Womxn Working in Student Affairs at HWIs?**

As stated in Chapter II, literature around Black womxn in student affairs continuously reiterates the importance of community and the need for belonging for Black womxn in higher education, especially those who work at Historically White Institutions (Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). Community is often discussed in relation to other Black womxn, the role of the family, and local community as a means of support for Black womxn working at HWIs. When discussing community with the participants, I wanted to explore not only what community looked like on

campus for them but how community was cultivated and sustained. For mid-level Black womxn who work at HWIs where they are the only or one of few Black womxn or Black staff, community may differ from those who work at an institution where there is a critical mass of Black womxn, Black staff, or BIPOC staff represented. In general, the themes related to the phenomenon of community were chosen community, campus-based caucuses and counterspaces, off-campus colleagues, professional organizations, and local community.

Overall, community assists mid-level Black womxn in providing a sense of support and belonging as they work at HWIs and navigate often predominantly White spaces. Betty shared that her community “has definitely been people who have my best interests at heart, but are also willing to, be like, okay you took that too far, or like, you probably didn’t have to say it that way, or you could have like, they, they will check you nicely.” Community, as demonstrated through the previous example, is not only about support but also a space for affirmation and accountability.

Grace, Lauren B, and Sophia all spoke of caucuses that allowed them to connect with Black colleagues around campus. This was especially important for larger institutions where it was easy to be siloed without community support. Along with Black staff and faculty caucuses, Grace, Michaela, Fatimah, and Sabrina also spoke of Black womxn or BIPOC womxn counterspaces that have been created by Black womxn to generate community at their institution. Some of the previously mentioned formal counterspaces are institutionally supported through funds provided by the Vice President or Provost offices. Whether these spaces are formalized through funds or institutional

recognition or informal, a number of participants spoke of the shroud of secrecy that surrounds these gatherings. This begs the question: Are these counterspaces really supported by the institution? Betty, whose community gatherings are informal, discussed how they often have to meet off-campus away from crowds so as not to offend their White counterparts who would wonder why they were not included. Sasha and Lauren B also mentioned this phenomenon of privilege and entitlement that caused their Black womxn or BIPOC womxn gatherings to be held away from intruding eyes.

Those who lack community at their institution find community through church communities, book clubs, sorority sisters, graduate school and doctoral program classmates, and professional organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA), and the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), to name a few. Many of the participants who are one of the few at their institution discussed the community role their colleagues at other institutions play. When asked what community looked like at her institution, Khadijah responded, “I’m still trying to build and seek out what community looks like, because overall to me community is a safe space.” Although Khadija is still in search of a chosen community on campus, she too maintains community with colleagues at other institutions.

Colleagues from other institutions that participants shared are a part of their chosen community are individuals with whom participants have either attended graduate school, former colleagues, or people they have met at conferences and institutes. These previously mentioned colleagues not only provide support or a sense of belonging for the

participants but also serve as mentors, especially the more seasoned colleagues. Khadija shared,

When I first became a supervisor . . . I was on the phone with my former supervisor literally every week, just like either telling her about my experiences, asking her how to navigate; and it was helpful to have someone in her role to have that with, because she knows my skill level.

Likewise, Lauren A shared a similar experience calling on her community made up of Black womxn at other institutions, stating:

I wouldn't say I have community, I guess, at [institution], but I definitely have community amongst other Black women in the field of [functional area]. So I can name several Black women who I feel like have served as mentors or who are always there for me, that work in [functional area] at other institutions.

While it may be more straightforward to develop community through school and professional organizations, cultivating community at one's institution outside of formalized counterspaces such as BIPOC womxn, Black womxn gatherings, or Black faculty and staff caucuses can be complicated. Without these formalized yet intentional means of creating community among Black womxn student affairs professionals, participants must be intentional in choosing with whom they form community. Many of the participants shared the saying, "all skinfolk are not kinfolk" when discussing what it means to find community with other Black colleagues, especially Black womxn. In other words, just because a person shares the identity of being Black with an individual does not mean they share the same views or understanding of Blackness or even buy into the notion of looking out for those who belong to the Black community at their institution.

For example, a few of the participants discussed how their expectations were not met when having a senior administrator who identified as a Black womxn. Lauren B shared:

Our vice-chancellor is a Black female and you always would think, okay, if a Black female is at the top, then it's going to be easy to navigate because even as an assistant director, mid-level, it's like, I'm still at the bottom. You know? And so, but at times, and I fall back on, you know, I attended Mid-Managers Institute, I think last summer, but again, 2020 has felt like two years. Even if you have Black colleagues who are at the top level, you know, all skin folk, ain't kin folk. And that's, again, something that I've learned as a manager. Like even if you have people around me, that doesn't mean that identity politics is going to be easy, that they're gonna give you, um, you know, a life jacket to say, come on, I got you.

Like Lauren B, some of the participants thought having a senior-level administrator who identified as a Black womxn would make it easier for other Black womxn to navigate or that the senior administrator would intentionally foster community for Black womxn in their division or at least be a resource or support system for them. Similar to Lauren B, those participants found it was the opposite. However, outside of counterspaces, for some, community was developed through work collaborations, lists of people to meet that Black womxn colleagues or non-Black supervisors supplied. Seeing an unfamiliar Black face around campus and desiring to get to know one another also provided opportunities for participants to forge community. Mentoring, while common in the literature regarding Black womxn in student affairs (Burke & Robinson, 2019; Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003), was not a central focus in this study. Nonetheless, a few participants also spoke of the importance of paying it forward through mentoring younger professionals as was done with them coming into the institution. In addition to providing belonging and

support, community has also assisted participants with informal onboarding as they transitioned and learned to navigate their institution.

While collaborations provided intentional or formal spaces to get to know their colleagues and see if a friendship blossomed, others developed community through informal social functions—lunches, grabbing coffee, dinners, after-work drinks, and taking the time to stop by a person's office simply to say hello. With COVID-19 impacting how individuals create community, the participants shared that they have sustained their relationships with people through Zoom check-ins that are either with individual people or grouped by Black womxn or Black staff and faculty. Others shared they send handwritten notes or rely on calling and texting to check in with their chosen community.

While COVID has impacted how we create and sustain community, the Black Lives Matter movement that reached new heights this summer has also revised how we think of community when encountering crisis and dealing with trauma directly or indirectly. Some of the participants mentioned how their institutions were hosting Zoom town halls or office Zoom meetings to foster space that allowed for discussing current events, including processing the countless Black lives lost this year. Other participants shared that checking in with their chosen community was important because of the emotional trauma Black staff and faculty were undergoing as they navigated work, COVID, and being Black in America. Some of the virtual counterspaces were designed as a virtual “laying eyes on one another” to see how people were doing, particularly as many saw an increase in the labor that was being asked of them due to both COVID and

an increase in race centered conversations and trainings. Overall, participants developed and sustained community in numerous ways. Community was not only an area explored through this study but also moved across the research questions when creating a holistic picture of thriving (*Figure 5*). The themes that were developed through the coding process illustrated that community not only plays a role in participants' ability to navigate or to thrive but also influences their onboarding experiences.

### **What Informal or Formal Onboarding do Mid-Level Black Womxn Working in Student Affairs at HWIs Receive?**

In discussing onboarding, it was very clear how community is a connection between onboarding and navigation of an institution as a means to thriving for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Formally, many participants seek onboarding externally (chosen campus community and outside of the institution) due to the lack of formal onboarding at their institution. Formal onboarding typically does not go beyond the commonly shared human resources training that is typically a catch-all onboarding process for all new employees regardless of the position and division in which they work.

The majority of participants were not formally onboarded in their mid-level role after moving on from their entry-level role. The themes that emerged related to this portion of the interview were the inadequacy of formal onboarding, the critical importance of informal onboarding that may include community-based onboarding, and how onboarding should account for nuances that speak to the experiences of mid-level Black womxn. However, onboarding is not nuanced unless onboarding occurs informally via community or self; yet, these nuances are needed in onboarding to assist mid-level

Black womxn in navigating their institution, specifically their encounters with racism and sexism.

From an informal onboarding standpoint, campus community (participants' chosen community or general colleagues) has also assisted participants in learning the campus culture, local community, and understanding the nuances needed to navigate the institution such as power dynamics, handling conflict, building relationships, and meeting preparation. Lauren A and Betty both spoke about how their office managers, who were also Black womxn, would provide them with the necessary information in order for them to be better prepared for meetings with other directors or senior leaders. Betty noted,

If our business manager wasn't a Black woman. Like I really don't know where I would be because she definitely, um . . . things that maybe the VP wasn't telling me, you know, she would call and say like, "Hey Betty, like you should know these things." "You should be prepared with this information" or "when you get ready to go into this meeting about space on campus, you need to be prepared with this stuff."

The role of Black womxn and informal onboarding is important to note because this is where mid-level Black womxn learn how to navigate their institution via a hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum included participants' understanding of who their supporters or allies would be, which colleagues are difficult and/or untrustworthy, how to accomplish goals with multiple stakeholders, etc. Along with learning their institution's hidden curriculum specific to Black womxn, mid-level Black womxn are also provided information that increases their social capital at the institution through informal onboarding.



When Sasha transitioned to her institution, her colleagues helped her get settled professionally and personally. This, in return, influenced Sasha to do the same for new BIPOC professionals. Taking it further, Sasha created a shared document for new BIPOC staff that provided them with the necessary community resources to help acclimate them to the campus and the local community. Additionally, Sophia, as a supervisor, intentionally recruited additional Black staff for her office and made it her duty to mentor her staff in learning how to “navigate systemic racism” at her institution, also known as “playing the game,” as she called it. Upon hiring her new staff, she immediately connected her Black womxn staff to other Black womxn across the institution. Other participants also shared a similar situation of Black womxn connecting them to other Black womxn upon arrival when possible.

Outside of participants’ communities, participants have shared that some supervisors will provide a checklist of things to learn, a list of people to meet, or a one-page document detailing things to which they need to gain access. Also, some participants shared that their staff meetings consist of professional development discussions about various topics. As one can see, onboarding is nuanced for Black womxn but different for each person.

Many of the participants have been forced to figure out their mid-level role on their own or through the help of external resources. This notion held particularly true if participants were previously employed in a different role at their institution. A common theme for participants who found themselves in a new role in a newly created office was

that they had to build everything up without the necessary support and sometimes necessary resources. Michaela stated,

So my role was new. Like, no one, I was the precedent. Like there was no one else that had ever done it. And so there was no onboarding process; and just to be quite frank [institution], their HR is awful. Like I've had not a great experience with their HR. Um, and I heard that echoed from other people . . . So I had no onboarding, like I came in and I was the onboarding process.

Grace, Michaela, Sasha, Fatimah, and Betty are either currently or were in newly created positions, with some in newly created offices that lacked a clear vision. Therefore, while they were figuring out their position, they were also figuring out their office, with some needing to hire new staff. There is also no institutional memory via documentation to support mid-level Black womxn in these predicaments making their situation far worse. Additionally, those who were hired to fill diversity quotas also saw a lack of onboarding as their hiring from the outside looking in seemed like a reactionary decision as opposed to a proactive hire. Proactive decisions include more forethought. While formal training is lacking for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, a few institutions host a campus-wide mid-level training or division-wide training that is cohort-based for new employees.

Although formal onboarding is not consistent across institutions, some participants achieved formal onboarding through external resources such as professional associations and institutes. Khadijah stated,

The Ujima Institute was definitely very helpful in terms of getting me skilled . . . Closing the Gap from ACUI has been definitely helpful in closing that gap. So you

have the Aspiring Directors Institute, and then you have Closing the Gap, which is a sub of that specifically for marginalized people that are aspiring to be directors.

Several participants shared that they attended professional institutes and annual conferences such as the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), the Mid-manager Institute (hosted by NASPA Region III/SACSA), the Ujima Institute (hosted by NASPA), the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA), the Southern Association of College Student Affairs (SACSA), and NASPA. Based on the participants' interviews, onboarding not only takes place at institutions, if at all, but occurs through colleagues on campus or at other institutions and professional organizations. Also, onboarding is not only tied to community when it comes to mid-level Black womxn, but it also varies across institutions, highlighting the need for more formalized efforts to aid in one's navigation of their institution and understanding their role and office.

### **How Do Mid-Level Black Womxn Who Work in Student Affairs at Historically White Institutions Navigate Being in That Space?**

Mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals navigate HWIs in various ways, as is demonstrated through the previous participant narratives. Identity, community, and onboarding all inform how participants navigate their institutions. In many ways, this is why this chapter unfolded by first discussing identity, community, and then onboarding—they are all interconnected. I shared participants' various salient identities because while race and gender are at the forefront of shaping most participants' lived experiences, other identities influence them as well. These various salient identities participants shared (highlighted in their individual narratives) influence the way they

navigate their respective institutions. In addition to identities influencing navigation of institutions, participants' community provided assistance with the onboarding experience of mid-level Black womxn. Community also helped to affirm Black womxn's identity and experiences and provide support as Black womxn together share in the experience of navigating a space not meant for them. The negotiating of identity plays a role in navigating spaces not meant for Black womxn.

Participants such as Fatimah and Grace discussed the complications in navigating spaces as Black womxn when entering White spaces. Both, having been knowingly hired to add "diversity" to the institution, recognize how their Blackness is received upon entering the room. Fatimah declared, "when my Blackness shows up, it's already a statement, period. I don't have to say anything else."

As indicated earlier, participants mentioned how their identities inform their navigation of HWIs through the role of identity politics. While not all participants discussed having to deal with identity politics, others did. Grace, Betty, Michaela, Lauren B, and Sasha all mentioned a hidden curriculum they learned to navigate working at an HWI and with non-Black colleagues. This hidden curriculum involved preparing for meetings, engaging with faculty or other student affairs colleagues who ignored their credentials. Participants also had to learn how to manage up and down as a mid-level administrator and determine how they can show up in spaces. For some participants, they chose to engage in code-switching as a means of navigating their institution. Code-switching is defined as "applying parts of their separate value systems to different situations as appropriate" (Sadao, 2003, p. 410). During Michaela's interview, she bluntly

stated that she “speaks White fluently.” Growing up middle class, Michaela spoke of participating in co-curricular activities that were majority White such as equestrianism. She also learned to give her verbal resume when introducing herself to White peers to put them at ease and demonstrate that she spoke their “language.” Michaela articulated what navigating her institution looked like for her, stating:

Although I am anti-assimilationist . . . I’ve been immersed in Whiteness, my entire life, no choice. And then recognizing my educational privilege, both my parents have degrees. They went to private Christian universities, White universities. I was homeschooled, but the only Black kid ever homeschooled. I think what those things lend to is I’ve been so thoroughly immersed . . . I’ve been so thoroughly in Whiteness. I think the only thing is to take on—I speak White and I don’t mean just by vernacular. I mean, behavior, all those things. I speak it fluently enough to know what peaks for you. I know how to speak to that piece of it.

“Speaking White” or being “immersed in Whiteness,” as Michaela recalls, is just one way mid-level Black womxn have had to navigate spaces that were not meant for them. Other participants also shared how they have to be mindful of their facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, etc., when in conversation with White colleagues so as not to be deemed as the angry Black womxn. Betty, for instance, shared a time when a White colleague called on her Black colleague to tone police her, not liking Betty’s directness in a prior conversation. Betty shared, “if I were a man, this wouldn’t be a problem.” Sasha also reiterated this notion saying, “I’m direct, not angry.” Sophia, too shared a similar experience with colleagues asking, “why is it an issue when I hold them accountable, but not an issue when White men do it?”

Another factor that contributes to mid-level Black womxn's navigation of HWIs is their faith and spirituality. A number of participants referenced their faith as a means of helping them navigate their HWIs, particularly the challenges they encounter, whether that be the lack of support by the institution, lack of community, workplace conflict, institutional racism, or stressful work periods. The theme of faith and spirituality also occurred during the media elicitation activity when participants were asked to bring a media item that has informed their sense of thriving. Furthermore, the theme of faith and spirituality is also present as various participants spoke of thriving in relation to working in one's purpose or calling.

Along with navigating identity politics as a means of navigating their institution, some participants shared their experiences navigating campus politics when attending meetings. Earlier in this chapter, I shared Betty's recollection of the office coordinator preparing her before going into meetings. Lauren A also shared a similar sentiment when she first arrived at her institution about how the staff assistant, who was an older Black womxn, looked out for her and helped her get to know the institution and local community. On the contrary, Grace, who was isolated with no community and was not supported in her new role at a new institution, had to spend her evenings teaching herself the skills and information needed to succeed in her role.

In addition to colleagues' assistance and identity politics, participants also navigate HWIs by building their skill set, whether they receive these skills through onboarding or not. Sasha took a specific interest in conflict resolution and mediation, and because of these skills, coupled with her experience, she has been able to navigate spaces

in a way that has grabbed the attention of senior administrators. Sasha recalls a time when a dean took note of her work in helping to plan a recent town hall:

I think for me the sort of development that I've experienced over the years with sort of honing that craft people are like, you know, people are taking notice of that in ways that I maybe might not have even thought of. I, um, so for him to even say that, you know, not, not that we interact a ton, but we interact enough. And it was just interesting to know that he saw that as an important skill.

Along with developing skills, relationships that evolve into friendships or serve professional interests are also important in helping participants navigate their institutions. As previously mentioned, Fatimah mentioned that she was told upon her arrival at her institution that “relationships were currency” on her campus. Fatimah realized that to be able to navigate her institution successfully, she had to build relationships with various campus partners. Khadijah similarly saw this happen when she arrived at her institution, and her supervisor failed to provide her with simple office supplies. Instead, it was her colleague in the multicultural office who advocated for her in a meeting with other colleagues and gave her the necessary office supplies to help her get started during her first few days at her institution.

Moreover, navigating HWIs in the various ways outlined above is also coupled with the mid-level experience. When asked to describe their experiences as mid-level, most participants confirmed what literature says about being a mid-level (Belch & Strange, 1995). Participants described being a mid-level student affairs professional as one who is caught in the middle between administrators and students, with some having more direct engagement with students than others due to role responsibilities or shifting

responsibilities due to position vacancies in offices. Lauren B likened being a mid-level student affairs professional to working in construction, remarking:

We're following the blueprint of what either administration, what students want to do. But sometimes that architect can come in and be like, no, sorry, you don't have funding for it. Or like, no, we're going to scratch us. So you need to rebuild. So at times as a mid-manager, I feel like that construction worker where you're having to listen to everybody involved.

This metaphor also demonstrates the politics mid-level Black womxn also have to navigate that are influenced by campus culture, which informs participants' overall navigation related to identity, community, and onboarding. These factors also contribute to participants' sense of thriving.

Identity, community, and onboarding are all aspects of mid-level Black womxn student affairs participants' experiences that speak to whether they are thriving or not at their institution—the overall phenomenon addressed in this study. As I connected participants' narratives to the previously mentioned research questions, I came to the understanding that a part of mid-level Black womxn's navigation is tied to their onboarding experience, sense of community (also connected to their onboarding experience), external resources they have acquired, and how they do or do not negotiate their identity in various spaces. Institutions neither provide formalized onboarding for mid-level Black womxn to understand their role, office, and institution, nor do institutions provide any type of onboarding that is identity-conscious. Whatever onboarding is provided is often general and hosted by the institution. As a result, Black womxn are left to onboard themselves through learning the nuances of the institution and



rely on themselves and other Black womxn colleagues to figure out what it means to be a mid-level Black womxn at their respective institutions. In the next section, I discuss the media elicitation activity, which sheds further light on how they navigate their institution connected to the findings in this section, but also provide an alternative view in understanding participants' ability to thrive.

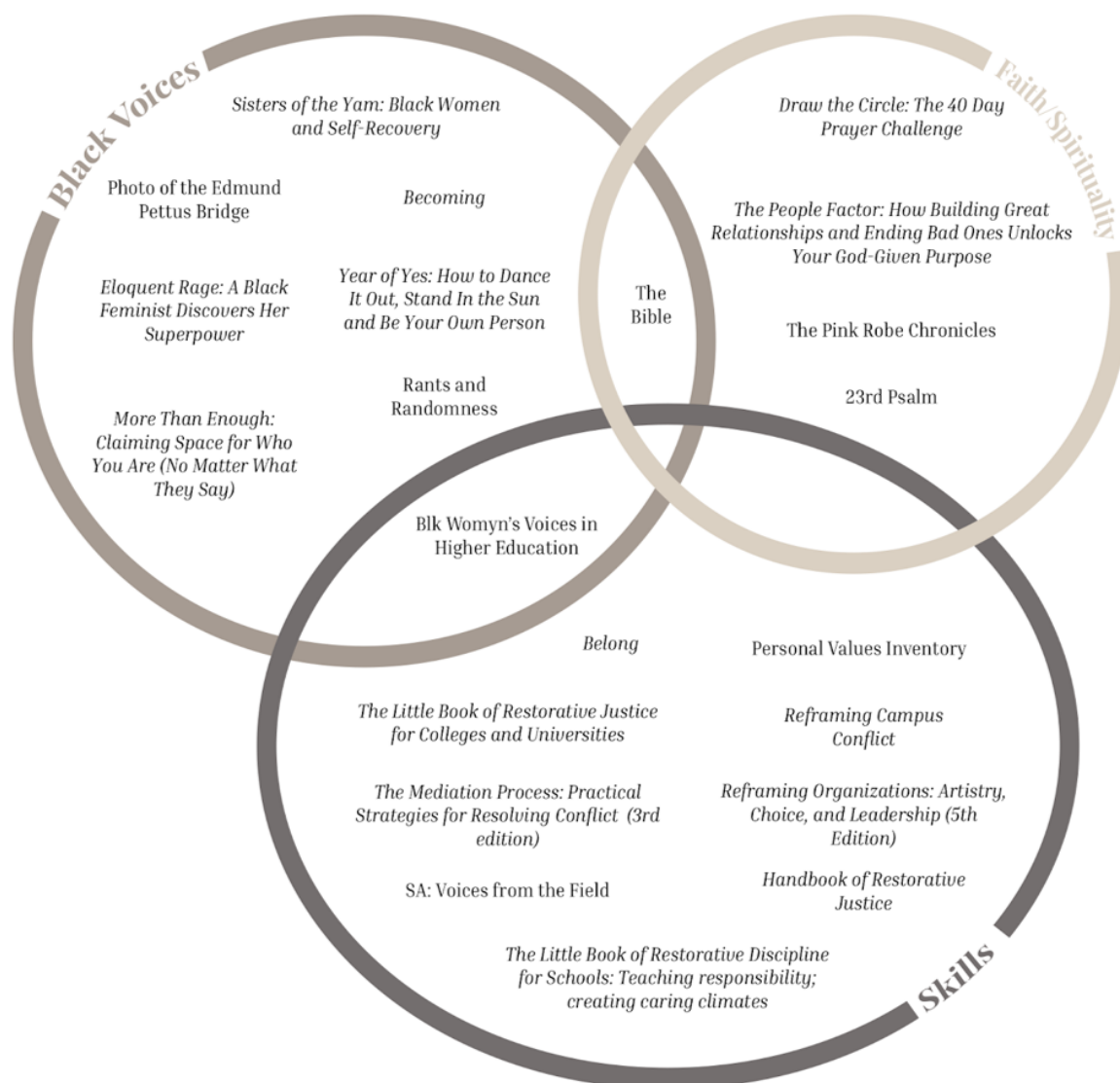
### **Media Elicitation Activity**

The media elicitation activity referenced earlier furthers this study's understanding of mid-level Black womxn's experiences, especially what it means to thrive in student affairs at HWIs. *Figure 6* highlights the items participants shared for the activity and the categories that best describe these items and their intended purpose.

The Venn diagram in *Figure 6* highlights the various items participants shared as an external media resource that aids them in their ability to thrive at their HWIs. The diagram's three categories of skills, faith and spirituality, and Black voices contribute to participants' sense of thriving. These three categories came about organically after reviewing the items individually and then looking for shared themes between the items. The Venn diagram in *Figure 6* made the most sense to showcase the items under their assigned categories to demonstrate where additional shared themes do or do not exist. This diagram not only highlights the categories from which participants gain additional knowledge in order to navigate HWIs and thrive but reiterates Black feminist thought in showcasing the importance of Black womxn sharing knowledge with one another and how Black womxn's experiences are tied to knowledge reproduction from the lens of counterstorytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Figure 6

## Media Elicitation Results



Khadijah shared both books and podcasts that fell in the category of Black voices, skills, and faith and spirituality. When sharing her items, she stated these items “[help] me to really think about, kind of those questions that you asked me earlier. Like, how do I build community? How do I navigate these spaces?” Additionally, participants were often

affirmed in their experiences when describing their usage of an item found under the Black voices circle. These items were also used as an inspiration to thrive. Michaela shared a photo she took of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a place she has visited numerous times, taking students on an educational trip to Selma. Fortuitously, her choice of image was poignant as the late congressman John Lewis passed away the day before we interviewed. When asked how this image helped her to thrive, she replied with emotion in her voice:

This is something for me that I think it kind of ticks all the marks of acknowledging folks that came before and what they sacrificed to get to this space (pause) and holding it . . . I think what happened there on Bloody Sunday, I think people physically putting down their lives for this is important to me in the work and that I can share this with students and not that they all get it. And not that they all will get it now, but I hope that they see this as like someone set out and said, as a college student, I'm going to go on this bus, this Freedom Ride bus, knowing that I may not come back. Right. On these buses people wrote their wills to their families. And so, um, yeah, I think those are, these are just images of course, but I think those are things for me that are, um, that really kind of bring home why I do this.

Michaela's photo of the Edmund Pettus Bridge not only helped her thrive but find purpose in her work.

Affirmation and inspiration were also themes found in the items shared by participants. Community in a non-traditional sense was another theme found in books authored by Black womxn, the Edmund Pettus Bridge photo, or podcasts. In particular, many of the items under Black Voices would not be deemed traditional academic resources yet held great influence in participants' lives as mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. For instance, Betty's chosen item for the media elicitation item was

Shonda Rhimes's *Year of Yes: How to Dance it Out, Stand in the Sun and Be Your Own Person* (2015). Betty first read the *Year of Yes* when she did not feel as if she were thriving. The book, she reflects,

gave me the tools to get to where I am now. Um, so I guess in that regard, I would say it's kind of given me like a foundation to remind myself that there are opportunities out there, whether it is out in the community to go do something or on campus. I just have to be willing to take a chance on myself.

Items that fell under the circle labeled Black voices, while not considered by White standards academic texts, provided tools for some to navigate their professional and personal lives. Items deemed traditionally more academic can be found under the category of skills.

The circle labeled skills shares some commonalities with the Black voices circle; however, the more traditional resources found in student affairs divisions, such as professional development books, are listed. While all of the items listed in the media elicitation activity are external resources, the skills circle highlights the lack of formal onboarding many of the participants received and, as a result, had to seek out through other means. For instance, books about conflict resolution, mediation, and student affairs-themed podcasts, to name a few, were some of the resources participants shared. In addition, we also see how participants place a particular focus on developing skills that fall outside of job responsibilities. None of the participants, for example, work in a conduct-related office; yet, there are a number of conflict-based resources found in the circle labeled skills. The resources shared in the previously mentioned circle help participants to better navigate the White spaces in which they work.

Lastly, the items under the category of faith and spirituality reiterate the sense of purpose many participants discussed in what it meant to thrive for them. The underscoring of faith and spirituality, which is a salient identity for many, also showcases the importance of one's faith in helping them move in and out of spaces not designed for them. Sabrina, for example, experienced a challenging time at work running a successful program while navigating campus politics and felt a lack of support from a group of Black womxn colleagues due to the nature of the program and it being assigned to her. As a means of dealing with the situation, Sabrina found herself relying on the 23rd Psalm, a bible verse she read daily and chose as her item for the media elicitation activity. When describing how this Bible verse influenced her sense of thriving at her institution and particularly supported her in this scenario, she recalled,

I remember one day I was reading this verse and I was thinking, you know, he prepares the table before me in front of my enemies. And I don't like to think of them as enemies. Right. But at that time, I was literally taking that verse word for word and applying it to what was happening there.

Sabrina's faith during these difficult moments at work guided her as she navigated a difficult situation. Grace similarly relied on her faith and specifically her chosen item, the Bible, to help her navigate racism at her institution. Faith and spirituality, along with works by Black authors and items focused on skill development, helped participants to thrive at various levels at their respective institutions.

As demonstrated from the above items listed in *Figure 2*, the racism and sexism that mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals face working in HWIs require external resources to thrive. Not only are these resources an external means of gathering

knowledge, these items again underscore Grace's quote that opened this chapter—"Predominantly White Institutions don't know how to support Black women." This constant theme where participants are forced to figure out their role on their own is perpetuated through the elicitation activity results. Sadly, Black womxn must rely on these external resources to be deemed (according to the White male gaze) a formidable opponent to their White counterparts. This underscores the common phrase many Black individuals have heard growing up that they have to be "twice as good." This is perpetuated in how the participants demonstrate the various ways they navigate and work to thrive at their institutions despite the systems of oppression they constantly face. Mid-level Black womxn are not supported by HWIs in a way that helps them thrive, so they are forced to cultivate resources externally through various resources, community, and professional networks to aid them in the navigation of their institution.

### **Thriving**

#### **In What Ways, if at All, do Mid-Level Black Womxn Student Affairs Professionals Thrive as They Navigate Historically White Institutions?**

In Chapter I, I discussed the importance of conducting qualitative research around the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals due to highlighting the varied experiences of Black womxn (i.e., Black womxn are not a monolith). It is important to reiterate this notion as I answer my overarching research question regarding mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thriving as they navigate Historically White Institutions. Thriving looks different for each individual. During each participant's interviews, thriving covered both the professional and personal, sometimes separately and sometimes together. Thriving for some professionals included

professional success, the ability to be promoted and gain a new title, and an increase in salary.

Others like Grace and Michaela neither equated thriving with success nor viewed their sense of thriving based on if they were climbing the career ladder. Instead, they focused their sense of thriving on purpose and positive impact. Others illustrated thriving by having a high level of social capital to navigate their institution. Sabrina embodied this type of thriving, having graduated from the institution in which she works. Sasha, while not an alumna of her institution, had worked in various positions at her institution, enhancing her skill set, which allowed her to navigate both student and academic affairs seamlessly. Fatimah, on the contrary, equated time with her sense of thriving and the ability to weave work and wellness together, whether that meant taking time to go to the gym during the day to “model wellness” for students or having a flexible work schedule that allowed time off to rejuvenate. All of these are examples of how mid-level Black womxn thrive at their respective institutions.

While all participants focused on their professional lives and at times mentioned aspects of their personal life such as the creation of boundaries to keep work and life separate or physical fitness, Betty, Grace, and Sabrina included more of their personal life as they reflected on whether they are thriving or not. Betty and Sabrina discussed how they were thriving professionally but maybe not personally due to the demands of work and school. While they may not feel as though they are thriving personally, they acknowledged that this part of their life was also important to overall thriving versus being separate from their professional life.

Although the interviews with participants captured participants' sense of thriving at HWIs, the media elicitation activity, which took place during the second interview, also depicts what thriving looks like for mid-level Black womxn at HWIs. The elicitation activity illustrated that Black womxn look to other professional organizations, books, podcasts, and assessment tools to help them enhance their toolkit of skills to succeed in their specific job role, navigate their institution, and learn what it means to be a mid-level professional. Mid-level Black womxn's overall navigation of their institution also connects to their sense of thriving as some, through sharing their experiences, could be perceived as navigating their institutions better than others, which is tied to their level of thriving.

Mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals who are able to thrive as they navigate HWIs are both resourceful and resilient. Due to a lack of institutional support, mid-level Black womxn have had to create their own narrative in order to thrive in spaces not meant for them. In a true testament to Sophia's claim, a phrase she heard at a conference was "sometimes all you get are your keys." In the next section, I detail more explicitly what thriving looks like, including the participants' definition of thriving and how they can thrive more.

### **Definition of Thriving**

Before conducting this study, I defined thriving as "indicative of happiness, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially healthy in their respective role in spite of having to navigate racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression at a Historically White Institutions." Thriving is also not synonymous with surviving. Following the



conducting of this study, a new definition has formed that incorporates participants' self-definitions of thriving:

Thriving is the ability to bring one's unapologetically whole self into any space without constant fear of discrimination. An individual who is thriving is working within their purpose, achieving their self-definition of success, appropriately compensated for their labor, and is able to have a positive impact on others while also growing professionally and personally. To thrive is to have one's identities and experiences affirmed and valued. Individuals are mentally and physically well and have a strong community support on and off campus. To thrive also includes leaving the spaces one occupies better for those coming behind them. Finally, to thrive is the ability to work in spaces where White colleagues and HWIs take ownership of their past and present ties to systems of oppression while creating and implementing an actionable plan to address the ways that they perpetuate these systems.

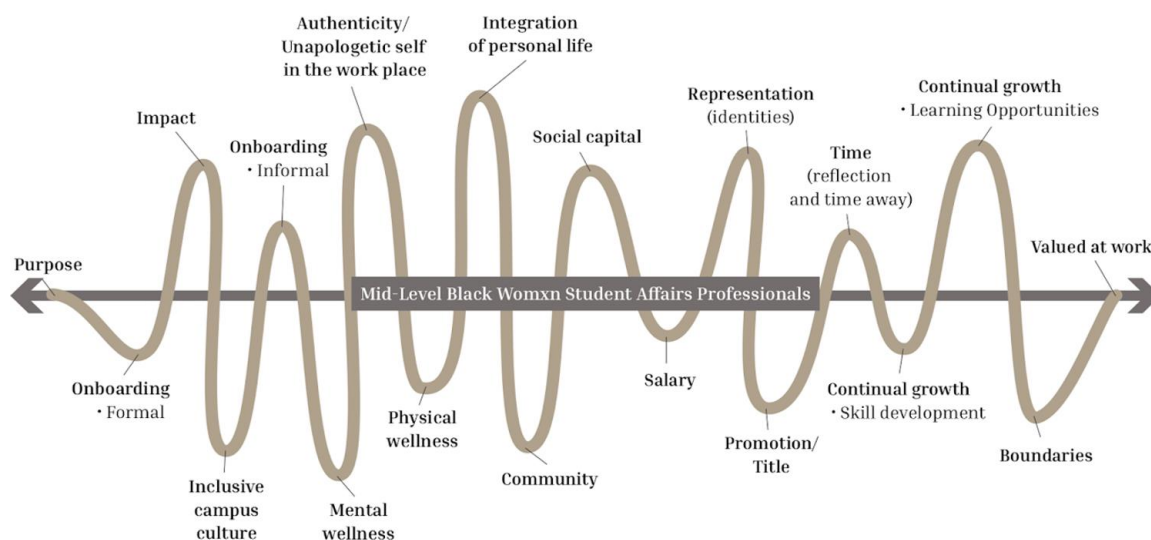
Thriving in accordance with the findings is not linear but instead on a continuum and could be graphically represented as a frequency wave (*Figure 7*). As opposed to being linear, thriving occurs in seasons, despite there existing an optimal level of thriving. Lastly, thriving is not something mid-level Black womxn are always aware of due to the labor required of us and the emotional labor of navigating racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression in our daily lives. To determine whether one is thriving, time and space for reflection are imperative. *Figure 7* conceptualizes this new definition of thriving on a continuum while also recognizing the peaks and valleys of thriving, which is demonstrated by the frequency wave. *Figure 7* with plotted points of different aspects of thriving is an example of how one could make meaning of their sense of thriving. The plotted points are not indicative of any participant in this study. *Figure 7* can also be used as a tool for mid-level Black womxn to understand their own sense thriving. This

tool could be used by the individual, supervisors, offices, divisions, and overall institution.

Figure 7

### Thriving Conceptual Framework

## Thriving



*Note.* This is an example (no connections to actual participants) of how a mid-level Black womxn could visually articulate their sense of thriving.

### Success

According to the participants, thriving as a mid-level Black student affairs professional is defined by having a positive impact on others (students, faculty, or staff) through the work that they do. Literature regarding Black womxn in student affairs often talks about success, and while success can be a part of thriving, it is not always synonymous with thriving. A few participants pushed back on individual success

equating to thriving as it is tied to White ways of learning and notions around productivity and personal achievement. Belch and Strange (1995) discuss views of mid-level professionals by senior administrators when individuals do not want to move up the career ladder are deemed unsuccessful because the assumption is that all individuals want to climb the career ladder, thereby being successful. Michaela and Grace specifically addressed this issue during their interviews as neither equated their ability to thrive with wanting to be successful. Grace shared,

Success doesn't necessarily mean making a lot of money. Doesn't mean having a high, uh, lofty title. I think for me, I am successful if I can wake up or go to bed at night and know that I've given everything that I've had . . . success for me and success in the world are two totally different things.

Michaela also shared a similar sentiment to Grace but also noting its ties to Whiteness, stating:

I have been really intentional with removing, um, Whiteness from that early on that first off success, cause I think people equate thriving and success, and I don't think they're in the same field, but I do want to be clear that I am intentionally removing this ideology that the only way to succeed or to thrive is to make a certain amount of money, um, move up in rank and position.

While Michaela and Grace had a different understanding of thriving and its ties to success, other participants connected success to thriving.

### **Job Promotion**

Five of the participants have been promoted at their institution as a mid-level administrator, moving on from Assistant director to associate director or associate director to director, which reiterates this notion of success as it relates to thriving. When

asked to define thriving and if they were thriving, some of the participants talked about being successful in their job, garnering social capital through relationships they have developed across their institution, and gaining new skill sets that fall outside of their job description. Social capital is fluid when thinking about thriving because community and onboarding are connected in how they inform the capital a participant has, which, in return, helps them to navigate their institution.

### **Faith and Spirituality**

Moving away from notions of success, productivity, and capital, thriving is also defined by purpose and peace of mind. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the role of spirituality and faith and its importance for the majority of participants. This theme, while more prevalent in other participants' interviews, is a common theme for most, showing up during discussions of thriving. I believe faith and spirituality, specifically Christianity, is tied to participants' definition of thriving through the theme of purpose. Many participants discussed that thriving was tied to their purpose or, in the case of Fatimah, "doing the work my soul is called to do." When working in your purpose or within your passion, thriving also pertains to having joy at work. Continuous growth and learning is also a part of thriving. Identity informs thriving additionally, with participants discussing having their identity, values, and beliefs affirmed at work and being able to be their authentic self and not fear being misunderstood by non-Black counterparts. Thus far, thriving has consisted of professional, faith, and spirituality, but also includes the personal. Being mentally well is also important as it relates to thriving—not feeling

overwhelmed, and having space to pause and reflect throughout the academic year contributes to a sense of thriving.

### **Thriving Needs**

When participants were asked to define thriving for themselves, as was previously mentioned, participants focused primarily on their professional life with some inclusion of the personal. After asking participants to provide their own definition of thriving, participants were asked what would help them thrive more at their institution. Whether participants were thriving or not, they all revealed areas where they could thrive more. It is necessary to note that even though the majority of participants felt they were thriving, all participants could name actionable items that would help them thrive more, reiterating the notion that there is no final level of thriving. Thriving is not linear but happens in seasons or periods. While there may be an optimum level of thriving, it does not include having it all at the same time, as Betty discussed. She shared that she believes “having it all” was not possible according to society’s definition.

To thrive more, participants pondered that they needed financial compensation that accurately reflected their education, experience, and work they are being asked to do. While pay is often an issue in the field of student affairs, pay equity was another issue. Lauren A had to request that her institution’s human resources department conduct a pay equity analysis, which led to a promotion and increase in pay after discovering that a White male counterpart was being promoted with a new title and salary, and their responsibilities looked the same. However, the response for both promotions differed a great deal. Lauren A remarked,

The interesting part was which still kind of like is on my spirit today when [colleague's name] got made an associate director, it was all over, Oh, we want to congratulate him for the title change, when I got made an associate director, radio silence. It was nothing. But I too was just kinda like, well Imma just take my pay increase and my new title and, and live it out. But honestly now I'm kind of like, okay, we did all this hoopla. Right. Whatever. Um, so that was fine. However, now that same White man is now director.

Lauren A's self-advocacy is just one example of how mid-level Black womxn must navigate being adequately compensated for their labor. Sophia also talked about how she just reached market value for her position. According to Sophia, Black womxn at her institution made significantly less than their White counterparts having access to look at what her counterparts made at her institution. Furthermore, in addition to pay equity, having a supervisor from whom one gleans knowledge, mentors, community on and off campus, and having more of a personal life all would help participants thrive more. Regarding personal life, four participants are currently enrolled in a doctoral program while balancing working full-time. Three have a doctoral degree, one participant is content with her master's degree, and two are considering the next steps regarding furthering their education.

Overall, the majority of participants considered themselves to be thriving in some way, although for some, they may not be fully thriving as is noted regarding thriving happening inconsistently. Grace, however, did not believe she was thriving due to a number of reasons, including a lack of community at the institution and in the town in which the school resided. When asked if she felt as though she were thriving, Grace noted,

I don't, I feel like I'm mentally taxed . . . I just had a conversation with my supervisor and I said . . . "this job is not what I thought. There are some things that if I had known this, I would not have taken this job." And I said, "I sit in a constant state, there are four things I positions or emotions I am constantly at, as it relates to my job, disappointment, sadness, rage, and frustration all the time nonstop" . . . I miss my life back where I was like, it was, I, I told a friend, I said, "I realized I should've stayed and just dealt with that one pain because I feel like I've adopted 10 pains, like in exchange for the one."

Grace also shared that she was not onboarded formally and informally and is hyper-aware of her identity as a Black womxn as she navigates her institution. Grace's experience working at her institution highlights how mid-level Black womxn are negatively impacted when they lack community, onboarding, and work at an institution where it is challenging to navigate for the previously mentioned reasons.

As I worked to make meaning of how participants defined thriving and discussed their experiences and ability to thrive, it is clear that thriving, as previously stated, is holistic. Boundaries are also important in having a thriving personal and professional life. A number of participants spoke of having clearly defined boundaries between work and personal life even during COVID-19, where the two have blurred for many. Fatimah shared, "I only recently have realized 'girl, create boundaries.'" Regarding community, boundaries was a reiterated theme where participants spoke of colleagues they engaged with between the hours of 9 am to 5 pm and those who were a part of their chosen community as friends they engaged with at "5:01 pm" and the importance of these boundaries and relationships.

While promotion in title was not mentioned as a part of thriving explicitly, success was discussed for some with varied understandings. As I previously discussed,

five participants were promoted at their current institution who also consider themselves thriving. While it is important to acknowledge that thriving and success are not synonymous, they are related for those who understand their sense of thriving related to success. Individuals being able to show up to work and be their authentic selves is also key to thriving. In the next chapter, I make sense of the findings as I discuss what the data means for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, HWIs, and the greater student affairs field.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

Sometimes all you get are your keys. —Sophia

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study and a brief overview of significant findings. Significant findings are connected back to the literature discussed in Chapter II. Following the summary of the study and major findings, I share limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of Study**

##### **Problem Overview**

Chapters I and II discussed the lack of literature regarding the experiences of Black womxn student affairs professionals, particularly Black womxn who are mid-level student affairs professionals. This gap in the literature involves an intersectional understanding of Black womxn serving in mid-level roles at HWIs.

It was important to listen to mid-level Black womxn to gain a broader understanding of Black womxn in student affairs from entry-level to senior administration. Exploring the experiences of mid-level Black womxn at HWIs allows for a greater understanding of the raced and gendered experiences of Black womxn in White spaces—spaces that were not meant for them but yet determine if and how mid-level Black womxn can thrive in these spaces. Additionally, understanding the ability to thrive

and experiences of mid-level Black womxn professionals allows researchers and institutions to make connections between the experiences of Black womxn at all three levels and determine trends that need to be explored further from both a practitioner and scholarly lens. Recognizing this gap in the literature influenced both the purpose of this study and the research questions outlined in the next section.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals as they find ways to thrive in university spaces that were never designed for them (HWIs). Below are this study's research questions.

- In what ways, if at all, do mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thrive as they navigate Historically White Institutions?
  - How do mid-level Black womxn who work in student affairs at Historically White Institutions navigate being in that space?
  - What informal or formal onboarding do mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs receive?
  - What does community look like for mid-level Black womxn working in student affairs at HWIs?

### **Review of Methodology**

Chapter III discussed in great detail the methodology of this study. A phenomenological qualitative study that explored the phenomenon of thriving regarding mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at southern HWIs was implemented.

A demographic Qualtrics survey, semi-structured interviews, and a media elicitation activity were implemented to explore and understand participants' experiences.

Participants were interviewed twice, one hour per interview. The media elicitation activity took place during the second half of the second interview. To analyze and code data, I used an inductive analysis procedure (Bhattacharya, 2017). The inductive analysis procedure is the "process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, chunk them into small analytical units of meaning for further analysis" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). This type of coding process allowed me to pull out themes from the various types of data. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the study's major findings and themes from Chapter IV and discuss the meaning of the findings. First, however, I return to the critical theoretical lenses used to frame the study to view the findings of thriving, navigation, and community in the context of HWIs.

### **Theoretical Critique of Findings**

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

The use of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) allowed me to center participants' narratives and underscore the knowledge of Black womxn and how it influences Black womxn's self-definition. We see self-definition and the reproduction and sharing of knowledge by, and sometimes between, Black womxn influence each participant's navigation of their institution. Whether participants considered themselves to be partially or fully thriving or unfortunately not at all, each participant demonstrated how they took ownership of their own narrative to navigate an institution that was not created for them. Additionally, when looking at the findings from the media elicitation

activity, Black womxn's knowledge presents itself as a recurring theme with many of the items provided by participants as a resource for other Black womxn authored by Black womxn.

The incorporation of Black womxn's voices to aid participants in thriving also underscores the nuances of race and gender that general onboarding overlooks. A one-size-fits-all approach to hiring, transitioning, and formal onboarding will not work for mid-level Black womxn because the tools used to succeed, according to Whiteness, do not work for non-White individuals who did not create the system. We see this in Chapter IV when participants either taught themselves the skills needed to do their job or sought out additional skills through external resources, including other Black womxn or professional organizations. Onboarding is discussed in greater detail in the recommendations section of this chapter. In this particular instance, mid-level Black womxn need specific tools as using the "master's tools" will not work (Lorde, 2007).

The "master's house" (HWIs) needs to be dismantled for all mid-level Black womxn student affairs to thrive at an optimum level consistently. Audre Lorde (2007) writes, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (p. 111). Nevertheless, dismantling HWIs is not the focus of this study, but an important concept to consider when thinking of what it means truly to thrive at HWIs as a mid-level Black womxn. As this study centered the experiences of mid-level Black womxn tying back to Black feminist thought, controlling images must be

unpacked as they inform participants' experiences and were discussed during their interviews.

### **Controlling Images**

Black feminist thought includes several tenets, including controlling images (Collins, 2009), stereotypes placed upon Black womxn. The angry Black womxn, mule, and Black lady are a few of the controlling images that came out of participant interviews. Several participants spoke of various controlling images, particularly the amount of labor asked of them and how their White counterparts perceive them. Many of the participants discussed how they navigate tone policing done to them or by self because they are hyper-aware of outside perceptions by White colleagues. Many of the participants would align with the image of the Black lady, "middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability" (p. 88). Sabrina, in particular, addressed the notion of respectability politics in discussing her identity as a Southern Black womxn and how it informs her engagement with non-Southerners who she admits sometimes "will do things differently than she would."

The angry Black womxn is another image that the majority of participants addressed explicitly or implicitly. In discussing workplace conflict, Sasha stated, "I'm direct, I'm not angry." The two, according to Sasha, are often conflated by her White counterparts. Betty also discussed how she has had to navigate being a direct person and how White colleagues and White students' families perceive her during meetings or events. These examples of controlling images, rooted in racism and sexism, demonstrate how mid-level Black womxn navigate their institutions as they work towards thriving.

Referring back to the new definition of thriving shared in Chapter IV, the first line of the definition speaks to being free from controlling images and instead having the ability “to be their unapologetic self in these spaces without constant fear of discrimination.”

Lastly, many of the participants spoke of overextending themselves in their role, whether that is seeing their former position broken into multiple roles after they left an office, or having to navigate building an office from the ground up, or working in a role with limited boundaries between work and home, especially now with COVID-19.

Michaela recalled how in her previous mid-level position, she had to train several people to do what she did alone. Michaela remarked, “I had to train five other people . . . to do the job I was doing by myself and my other two things I did. They split it between two people.” This image of the mule also connects to Black womxn’s health and the potential for health issues due to high stress levels. Sasha stated, “The impact of a culture that’s prone to some of those health factors and then a career that is prone to some of those health factors. I just think that that’s a huge part, uh, you know, really needs to be discussed, especially as it is so associated with thriving.” Sasha’s observation about the predispositions for health issues coupled with stress is important to note regarding the negative impact on mid-level Black womxn’s ability to thrive at HWIs. The previously mentioned ways in which HWIs impact mid-level Black womxn’s ability to thrive is centered using Black feminist theory.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), as discussed in Chapter I, provides context to the Historically White Institutions where participants work. The

participants' respective HWIs are also located in the U.S. South, which adds another layer to the participants' positionality (Whitaker et al., 2018). In this section, I examine the tenets of CRT to analyze this study's findings. Racism is ordinary and is demonstrated through various participants' experiences navigating their institution. For example, Khadijah shared a story of walking into her office building behind two White students when the White male-identified student purposefully closed the door in her face while with another student. When told by the White female-identified student that Khadijah was right behind them, the male-identified student replied, "I know." This is just one example of the daily encounters with racism mid-level Black womxn face as they navigate their institutions.

Regarding counterstorytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), the participants' interviews highlight the importance of counterstorytelling via their shared narratives, which aids in exchanging knowledge between Black womxn. Each participant's narrative highlighted various experiences of a mid-level Black womxn student affairs professional working at a Historically White Institution. These experiences both differed and shared similarities illustrating the different ways Black womxn navigate their institutions, their identities, build community, and engage with challenging colleagues. Counterstorytelling allows not only for Black womxn's voices to be centered but also reiterates the importance of highlighting different stories, which challenges Eurocentric narratives of mid-level Black womxn at HWIs. Counterspaces, as demonstrated in this study's findings, foster community. Although many participants cautioned that not all "skinfolk are kinfolk," these counterspaces, either formal or informal, provide a safer space for

mid-level Black womxn to be their unapologetic selves in addition to forming community with other Black womxn or BIPOC womxn or overall staff (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2019). These counterspaces serve not only as a space to foster community for mid-level Black womxn but also as a retention tool because participants who had counterspaces to find refuge felt a sense of belonging (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solórzano et al., 2000). Participants who had community or felt a sense of belonging, not necessarily always to their institution but with a group of Black womxn colleagues, were more than likely thriving.

Interest-convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) is also illustrated by hiring mid-level Black womxn staff to fulfill diversity quotas at HWIs. While the institution and students benefit from representation and labor of Black staff, mid-level Black womxn, in return, are not always able to benefit from the work they put into their institution. Grace summarizes this conundrum, stating, “that was a win for y’all maybe not a win for me, but it was a win for you all.” Grace’s comment illustrates how HWIs benefit from diversity hires, sometimes to the detriment of mid-level Black womxn when hiring is not intentional and instead reactionary. Hiring to fill a quota negatively impacts mid-level Black womxn’s ability to thrive. From Grace’s perspective, her institution hired her because she was Black to make the institution look progressive; however, Grace’s experience has been far from positive due to a lack of community, onboarding, and support from her institution in performing her job. Grace is also having to navigate faculty politics, even though she has earned her doctorate and served in a director role.



Regarding the labels and social construction of race, all participants identified as Black; however, in Chapter I, I defined Black as inclusive of those who identify as belonging to the African Diaspora. When asked to list their ethnicity, most of the participants listed African American or some label that nods to being African American; however, one participant identified as both biracial (Black and White) and Black due to being adopted and raised by a Black family. Another participant identified as Haitian American; however, due to the context of being raised, educated, and working in the South along with the Black/White binary race is discussed in this region of the United States, they identify as African American in most spaces (although during the interview mentioned if they wanted to “be picky, they would say they are first-generation Haitian American”).

Intersectionality and anti-essentialism are exemplified through the participants’ narratives, all of whose summaries can be found in Chapter IV. Each participant’s experience navigating an HWI is different from the next. How they chose to show up in the spaces they occupy and engage with their Black and non-Black colleagues differed due to their positionality and salient identities. All participants shared the lens of Black womxnhood and thus, some common challenges in attempting to thrive at HWIs; however, they each articulated their own self-definition differently. For some participants, faith and spirituality, class, education, familial relationships, or regional affiliation held more saliency than other identities even preceding their identity as a Black womxn.

Furthermore, each participant also brings various years of experience, functional area expertise, and institutional type differences that also informs their worldview. This is also demonstrated in the varied answers I received when asking participants to define thriving (*Figure 7* in Chapter IV). Participants varied in their responses, with some feeling as though they were thriving because they were promoted at their institution, which increased their salary. Others thrived because they had a strong sense of boundaries between work and personal life and did not subscribe to Whiteness in their view of success. Their view of success was tied to having a positive impact on others, especially students. Furthermore, some participants felt they were thriving because they had a strong chosen community and collegial relationships across campus, which increased their social capital. Time, mentioned in Chapter IV for some, aided in participants' sense of thriving because they could have a flexible schedule due to working in student affairs or now because of COVID-19, where their personal and professional life is more integrated working from home.

These are all examples of what it looks like for mid-level Black womxn thriving at HWIs and how they have carved out space for themselves to thrive despite working in a space dominated by racism and sexism. While every participant could name certain factors that could contribute to a greater sense of thriving, they recognized that to fully thrive or reach an optimal level, systems of oppression would have to be nonexistent. Nevertheless, many would consider themselves to be thriving in some way. While there are some commonalities, there are stark differences between some of the participants, with some feeling as though they are fully thriving, others thriving at some level maybe

more professionally than personally, and others not thriving at all during this season of their lives. Regardless of where they are on the spectrum of thriving, their stories highlight the array of experiences Black womxn bring and live as they work in an institution created in a system in which they (we) were never meant to succeed.

Although success is not synonymous with thriving, some participants understood success to be a part of thriving. Success, when understood from the lens of Whiteness, is demonstrated through career trajectory, financial gain, and social capital. CRT critiques these ideals through Whiteness as a property tenet (Harris, 1995; McCoy & Rodricks 2015). Michaela and Grace challenge this notion of success as their definition of thriving is not tied to success, and their definition of success is not associated with their title and increased income, despite wanting to be comfortable financially. Their view of success is rooted in the question: Are they living out their life's purpose? Grace goes even further, stating that her success is not of this world but ties it back to her Christian faith.

On the contrary, concerning the acquisition of terminal degrees, three participants have their doctorate, and four participants were enrolled in doctoral programs at the time of this study. Education is an example of Whiteness as property because it provides a certain level of capital, which aids mid-level Black womxn in navigating HWIs. Additionally, five participants have been promoted at the institution where they work, serving in their second, or in some cases, the third role at their university.

Again, moving up the career trajectory, regardless of having a positive impact, is another example of Whiteness as property, which also relates to how mid-level Black womxn rely on each other via community or seeking additional knowledge and skills

from books, professional associations, and other professional development opportunities. These ways of knowing and learning allowed the participants to increase their capital as they work to navigate White spaces. It is important to acknowledge that the previously mentioned ways of knowing and learning tie back to the previous quote about using the “master’s tools” to dismantle systems of oppression. While some of the participants have been able to use the “master’s tools” to navigate, it is important to note that they are not able to dismantle the “master’s house” (HWIs). Instead, the participants are trying to navigate how to work within this space that was not meant for them (Lorde, 2007; Wallace et al., 2020), and as a result of this navigation, some of the participants may be engaged in work to dismantle the “master’s house.” These tools helped participants navigate these spaces to thrive at various levels but still battle racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression daily. To thrive does not mean to have rose-colored glasses or not to encounter systems of oppression. As explained and later defined in Chapter IV, to thrive still considers the role and impact of White supremacy in its shaping of higher education. However, the participants’ definition represents what it means to *fully* thrive. As previously mentioned, thriving is on a continuum. Participants who are thriving in various areas of their professional and personal lives work in different environments and navigate differently from those who are not thriving.

Often mid-level professionals are an afterthought, which is underscored by the fact that they are caught in the middle of the two. Although the lack of onboarding might be common for mid-level professionals across racial and gender lines, the stakes are much higher regarding employment for those who identify as Black womxn. There is so

much more at risk because they are not only navigating an institution not made for them. They are also trying to navigate an institution while dealing with racism and sexism daily at work and in their personal lives. Grace shared an example of what navigation looks like, saying:

The fact that I don't have any room to be a Black woman and to be a Black woman that shows any level of passion. Like I don't feel like I have that room to get fired up. Right? Like you have the room as a, as a White woman or as a White man to say and talk like the ridiculous things I've heard people say, you actually said that out of your mouth? Like, I can't even believe some of the things I've heard faculty say out of their mouth . . . and I am tired a lot because I don't have that space. Like I always think about how does this email sound like, you really want to say a thing, but like, don't use your hands too much.

Grace, through her story, shares one of the many ways mid-level Black womxn navigate HWIs. Both CRT and Black feminist thought centers on narratives like Grace's throughout this study. As I have discussed in this section how the two previously mentioned theoretical frameworks make meaning of the findings, the next section contextualizes thriving.

### **Contextualizing Thriving**

This study explored the ability of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs to thrive at Historically White Institutions. In Chapter IV, I discussed the findings of this study and shared how participants defined the phenomenon of thriving. Each participant defined thriving differently from the next, with commonalities between the varied definitions. In creating a new definition of thriving from Chapter I, it was necessary to also include in this new definition of thriving what participants shared would help them thrive more. Thriving as defined by the participants involved the professional for all and

the personal for some, highlighting the need to look at thriving for Black womxn from a holistic lens. From the participants' individual definitions and how their response in reflecting on whether they were thriving or not, one can gather that thriving is not only about one's professional sense of self but also (as I discussed in Chapter I) involves the personal. Therefore, thriving (see Chapter IV) is defined holistically; however, the definition has evolved to be more in-depth, encompassing the racialized and gendered aspects of the participants' experiences.

When analyzing the various definitions of thriving provided by participants, it should be noted that community, onboarding, and identity, which then informs overall navigation, all play a role in one's ability to thrive. One takeaway or observation from this study related to thriving is that most participants feel as though they are thriving, even if other elements could improve their level of thriving. For instance, part of one's capacity to thrive is their ability to bring their whole self into work as Black womxn without judgment or controlling images placed upon them. In discussing salient identities, identity politics, and overall navigation of their institution, participants shared how they had to navigate their institutions as Black womxn, which included an increased awareness of their dress, hair, tone, facial expressions, emotions, etc. The burden of having to navigate White spaces can inhibit one's ability to thrive because these spaces were not created with them in mind. Referring to Grace's quote in the previous section, one can see identity politics at play and how her ability to thrive is impeded as she articulated her awareness of how to present in White spaces. For some participants, there

is a level of being unapologetic about who they are and how they take up space that enables them to thrive.

This was demonstrated during COVID as all of the participants were able to work from home. For the majority, working from home allowed participants the space to be their most authentic self because they were in their home, which was considered a safe space. Along with having the ability to thrive more in spite of COVID—for example, an increased focus on wellness for some—lines were blurred between work and home, which was not a positive effect of COVID. Additionally, it is important to apply the lessons learned from COVID to institutions when the pandemic is over. How can HWIs remove Whiteness when defining success and be intentional in fostering spaces for mid-level Black womxn to be their most authentic self so that they can thrive? Both Michaela and Grace reframed their understanding of success when asked to define thriving, with Michaela stating that she is intentional in “removing Whiteness from success.” Productivity has been a buzz word when discussing what it means to work from home during a global pandemic (Ahmad, 2020). Therefore, HWI decisionmakers should be inclusive and reflexive when thinking about lessons learned during COVID that are applicable to institutional culture post-pandemic that impact mid-level Black womxn’s ability to thrive.

However, it is necessary to note that aside from the office environment, other identities or factors can contribute to individuals’ ability to be their unapologetic self, whether that includes social capital from years of working at a particular institution, age, phenotype, or relationships with colleagues (not necessarily chosen community), etc.

Furthermore, community also assisted participants in their ability to thrive by assisting them in the navigation of their institution through unofficial onboarding in understanding roles, office, institution, and local community. From experiences shared by participants and my own personal experience, human resources typically provide a standardized onboarding to all new staff. However, Black staff, especially Black womxn student affairs colleagues, helped other Black womxn staff learn a hidden curriculum—understanding the campus culture, who to trust, who not to trust, and what contributes to gaining social capital at one’s institution. Unfortunately, this hidden curriculum comes about as a necessity, not as an option to help mid-level Black womxn thrive due to the lack of onboarding participants received. A common theme was that mid-level Black womxn in student affairs either received limited onboarding or none at all. The lack of formal onboarding reiterates the need for counterspaces and community so that mid-level Black womxn can receive a more nuanced understanding of their institution. While there is a need for counterspaces and community for mid-level Black womxn, this does not alleviate senior leadership and non-Black colleagues from taking ownership in their role in perpetuating White supremacy and its impact on mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals.

When reviewing the findings, aside from race (Black) and gender (womxn), other identities are salient to participants. For some participants, faith and spirituality precede race and gender in the level of importance and influence in one’s overall identity and navigation of HWIs. Other salient identities participants mentioned include socioeconomic status, regional affiliation, identifying as a first-generation college



student, and being a parent. Some participants navigated with their faith, guiding the way they traversed their institution. Their faith also influenced their sense of thriving and how they defined it for themselves. While gender identity (all participants identified as cisgender) and sexual orientation did not come up as a salient identity (all participants identified as straight with one participant choosing to not disclose their sexual orientation), it is critical to note that mid-level Black womxn who do not identify as cisgender and straight could identify differently regarding which identities are most salient and inform their navigation of their institution as well as their sense of thriving. For example, if a participant identified as having a marginalized sexual orientation and/or gender identity, their encounter with multiple systems of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.) creates a different narrative from the ones shared in this study. In the limitations and future research section, I will discuss gender identity and sexual orientation further.

As student affairs professionals, particularly those who identify as mid-level Black womxn, begin to think about what it means to thrive, it is important to not only define thriving but also think about what is needed to thrive at the individual and systemic levels. HWIs must unpack their troubled histories with racism going back to slavery and how it has influenced the experiences of Black staff, faculty, and students. Thriving for mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at Historically White Institutions includes being fairly compensated for work, autonomy and support in the workplace, community on and off campus, and the ability to navigate spaces free from controlling images placed on them by White counterparts. Additionally, health and wellness are a

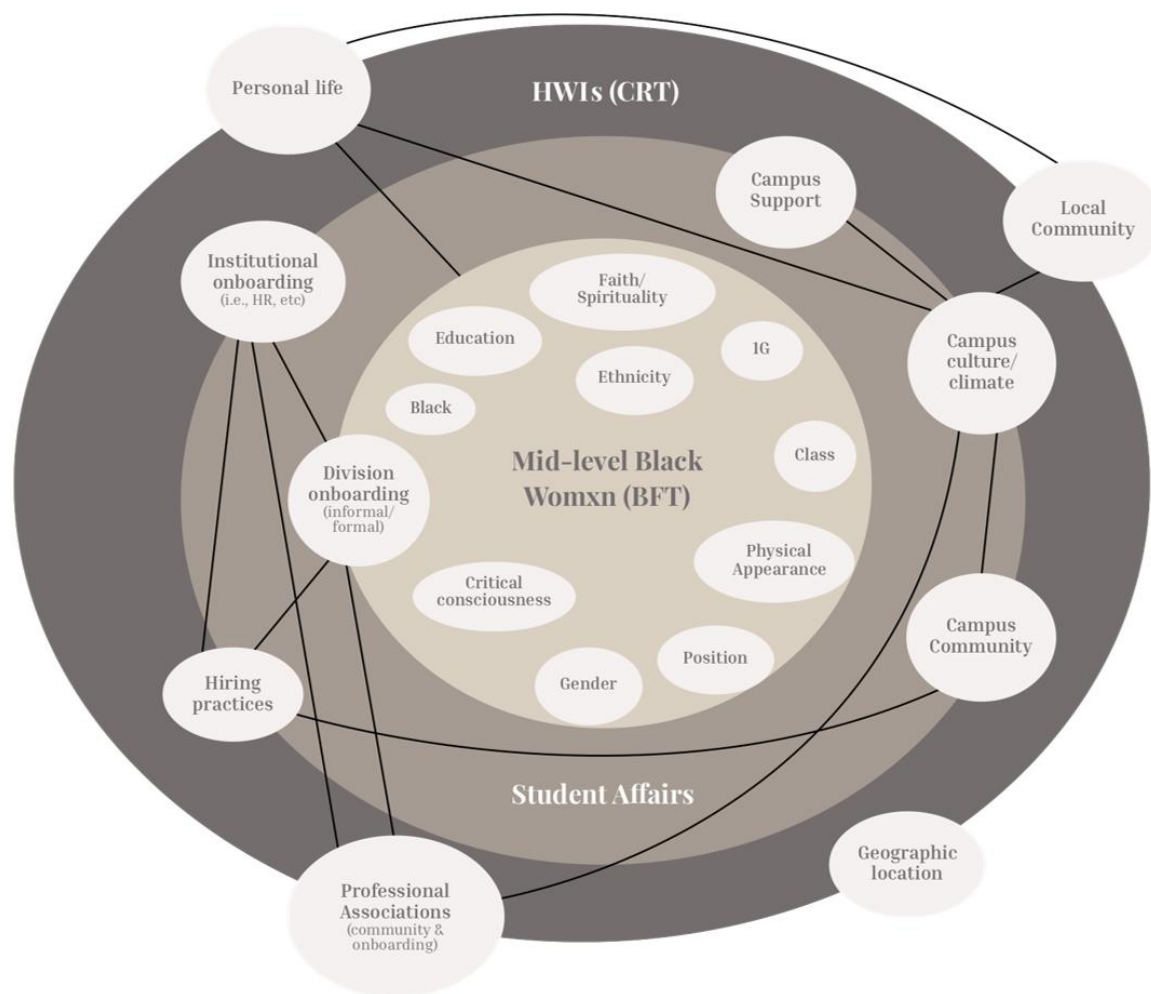
priority, and mid-level Black womxn would no longer be the only one or one of few Black staff in offices and overall institutions. Furthermore, mid-level Black womxn would be formally onboarded in their role and at their institution. Mid-level Black womxn would also receive adequate professional development funds and integrate their personal and professional lives since balance is not always achievable.

### **Revised Conceptual Framework**

It was essential to revisit the conceptual framework first introduced in Chapter I to provide further context to the study's findings regarding mid-level Black womxn student affairs professional's ability to thrive at HWIs. The conceptual framework, which incorporates the theoretical frameworks of CRT and Black feminist thought in providing context to the lived experiences of mid-level Black womxn thriving in HWIs, evolved after the study was conducted (*Figure 5*, Chapter IV). In making meaning of the phenomenon of thriving, the conceptual framework was revised (*Figure 8*) to highlight the relationships between local community, geographic location, HWIs, student affairs, and mid-level Black womxn and the salient identities that inform their sense of thriving at their institution.

Figure 8

## Revised Conceptual Framework



The black lines that connect various circles demonstrate how mid-level Black womxn's sense of thriving is not only tied to community, onboarding, and navigation, which connects to their salient identities, but also how identity, community, and onboarding are all connected to mid-level Black womxn's navigation of their institution. Professional associations placed on the outskirts of the HWI circle demonstrate how Black womxn use these resources as a form of onboarding due to the lack of institutional

onboarding they receive. The lack of community, onboarding, and support mid-level Black womxn receive is also tied to not only the local community, but also the campus culture and climate. If an institution is not welcoming to BIPOC individuals and is situated in a racist location, this all will increase the negative experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals, lowering their sense of thriving. Whitaker et al. (2018) discuss the dual context of living in the South, which Sabrina, Fatimah, and Sophia referenced to a degree during their interviews as they unpacked what it meant to be either raised in the South and/or work at a Southern institution. If we revisit the revised thriving definition shared in Chapter IV, we must recognize that mid-level Black womxn's personal lives and the surrounding community in which their institution resides also impacts their sense of thriving, as it connects to their experiences at their institution and division of student affairs which, again, ties back to their ability to thrive.

### **Comparison to the Literature**

As I make meaning of this study, particularly in this study's exploration of the phenomenon that is mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive, it is important to note how some of the findings in this study affirm what literature has discussed regarding mid-level Black womxn in student affairs. Again, the literature is limited regarding mid-level Black womxn in student affairs; however, this study has underscored the literature's discussion about the impact of community between Black womxn working in student affairs (Hope, 2019; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). Although participants shared their connections to other Black womxn who were a part of their chosen community as office or campus colleagues, none of the participants

work in a setting that had a critical mass of Black womxn employed in their student affairs division. This reiterates mid-level Black womxn's need for connecting with other Black womxn staff at their institution, local community, or colleagues at other institutions.

Furthermore, many of the participants are one of the few within their division or at their level, which places them in spaces of being tokenized and isolated (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). Some of the participants also shared that while their chosen community might consist of Black womxn student affairs professionals, their community also includes Black men and other staff of color. In the instances of participants who are the only ones in their office, division, or at their level (one participant is the highest-ranking Black womxn in her division as a mid-level professional), some of the participants' chosen community included White men and womxn. Regardless if Black womxn have a professional peer community that includes non-Black individuals, their core chosen community consists of majority Black individuals. Black faculty and staff caucuses play a role in many participants finding community.

In addition to discussions of community and its impact on mid-level Black womxn's ability to thrive at HWIs, this study also reiterates what literature has said about the lack of attention to mid-level professionals (Belch & Strange, 1995). Throughout the interviews conducted, the majority of participants shared how they lacked onboarding in their role and had to rely on themselves or other Black womxn colleagues to assist them in their onboarding process (Burke & Robinson, 2019). Furthermore, participants also

emphasized the current literature's discussion that serving in a mid-level role is truly being stuck in the middle (Adams-Dunford et al., 2019; Belch & Strange, 1995). As a mid-level professional, participants have to manage up and down as they work with senior administrators and students. This study not only affirms the previously mentioned areas in the available literature but also adds to the existing literature about mid-level Black womxn. In the next section, I offer recommendations to increase mid-level Black womxn professionals' ability to thrive at HWIs.

### **Recommendations**

This study's critical paradigm interrogated the previously mentioned experiences through the use of CRT and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Evans-Winters, 2019). By sharing Black womxn's knowledge and counterstories, these theoretical frameworks centered the participants' experiences. After synthesizing and understanding the phenomenon of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive, I have cultivated a list of recommendations that aid mid-level Black womxn's ability to thrive. This list of recommendations, however, does not place the burden of labor on Black womxn but instead places responsibility on HWIs and White student affairs staff. Additionally, some of these recommendations can apply to BIPOC student affairs staff.

This study's first recommendation is for institutions to create and implement a mentoring program for mid-level Black womxn staff that pairs new employees and employees who have been at the institution for at least 3 years. This suggested mentoring program would help new employees cultivate community and receive assistance in

navigating their institution. Should an HWI have low numbers of mid-level Black womxn, an institution could partner with a local institution with a similar profile. During interviews with participants, some of the Black womxn interviewed shared that they either currently work at an HWI or did so in the past and saw a high turnover rate of Black staff or specifically Black womxn staff. If an institution sees a high turnover rate for mid-level Black womxn, the institution bears the responsibility of conducting a thorough investigation to determine why there is a high turnover rate for mid-level Black womxn and unpack the reasoning behind the exodus. During my interview with Sasha, she discussed how some mid-level Black womxn leave student affairs to go into corporate America because of increased pay and decreased labor aligned with their education, skill set, and years of work experience.

Furthermore, if an institution has low numbers regarding mid-level Black womxn, institutions should develop a retention and recruitment action plan in collaboration with the following offices, but not limited to human resources, assessment, and institutional equity. Student Affairs should also offer specific training for mid-level professionals. As discovered through participant interviews, some institutions have a mid-managers training; however, a student affairs-specific training allows for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals to receive a more nuanced approach to understanding the institution as the division in which they work.

Additionally, institutionally supported Black staff caucuses should be created and implemented. Institutionally supported means that are not only resources (space, funding, and people) provided to the caucus, but also the institution publicly supports the caucus

where gatherings can be held without being under a shroud of secrecy. Institutionally supported caucuses also foster an environment where lunches can be held on campus instead of off-campus in the back of a restaurant, as participants disclosed, due to their non-Black colleagues' fragility. Along with caucuses, institutions should also create and implement institutionally supported mid-level Black womxn groups or host specific gatherings. These institutionally supported counterspaces for mid-level Black womxn foster community, although it is important to recognize the feasibility of this when numbers are low (see previous recommendations about recruitment and retention plan). It is also crucial to reiterate a commonly stated phrase shared by participants—"not all skinfolk are kinfolk"; therefore, just space created for mid-level Black womxn to gather does not mean that all mid-level Black womxn will attend or find community with every colleague. Regarding mid-level, because this group is so large, it is especially important to create a counterspace for mid-level Black womxn (West, 2020).

In Chapter IV, I shared how Sasha, a participant, created a transition document for BIPOC staff to assist them in their transition to the local area and institution. I recommend that a similar document be created by student affairs divisions to assist new mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals. Often, institutions focus on transitioning BIPOC students to the local area, but the staff is overlooked. Getting to know the local community surrounding an institution is just as important as understanding the campus culture. Grace and Lauren A spoke of not having community within their institution's surrounding area, while Lauren A felt as though she were thriving. Grace had a different experience. Lauren B also mentioned that because mid-



level professionals tend to stay longer in their role than new professionals, it is imperative to get to know the local community. Therefore, this transition document should include Black-owned businesses and restaurants, various places of worship for different religions, community organizations, etc.

Regarding formal onboarding such as an institution's overarching human resources trainings, student affairs divisions should offer specific onboarding for new staff, and offices should be required to create an onboarding system for the first 3 months of either a new employee or a current employee who is new to their role and/or office. Many of the participants expressed how they had to figure out their job on their own or rely on the knowledge of other Black womxn colleagues. This formalized onboarding by offices and divisions would provide a more comprehensive transition plan to aid mid-level Black womxn in thriving. Additionally, as staff leaves the institution, a detailed online transition folder should be left with the supervisor to assist the successor's transition in addition to an exit interview with the supervisor or HR staff or the supervisor's counterpart if there is a contentious relationship between the employee and their direct supervisor (which may be the reason for the employee leaving). Institutions should also be proactive and intentional when designing job descriptions and creating new offices. Sometimes new positions and offices are created reactively and fast-tracked or with many barriers, which does not provide a supportive environment for mid-level Black womxn to thrive professionally or personally.

The last few recommendations involve holding non-Black staff accountable in their role to create a more inclusive campus that will aid in mid-level Black womxn's

ability to thrive. Institutions should mandate various social justice education trainings and create race-based caucus groups for non-Black staff to understand their identity and learn about anti-Black racism and what it means to work with Black womxn staff in a colleague, supervisor, or supervisee role. These caucuses and trainings would be void of placing the emotional and mental labor on Black womxn and other Black staff. Instead, these caucuses and trainings would challenge non-Black colleagues to lean into discomfort and take ownership of how they perpetuate various systems of oppression, specifically racism and sexism in the workplace and its impact on mid-level Black womxn. Furthermore, these trainings should also not place additional labor on BIPOC staff who are often the majority of staff working in institutional equity and multicultural affairs offices where they are often charged to lead these types of trainings. HWIs and student affairs divisions should seek resources external to the institution (outside organizations and consultants) and other colleagues to lead these trainings. These caucuses and trainings would aim to increase non-Black colleagues' awareness, knowledge, and skills. This is especially important as it is not the sole responsibility of Black womxn to ensure their own thriving.

To conclude the recommendations section of this chapter, it is also recommended that supervisors conduct informal check-ins every 3 months to determine if mid-level Black womxn are thriving and what can be done to better their work experience. This type of check-in should also be conducted formally during midyear and annual performance evaluations. In the next section, I discuss this study's limitations and conclude with future areas of research.

### **Limitations**

In Chapter III, I discussed the impact COVID-19 had on this study's methods—removing the focus group and expanding the geographic location from which participants were selected (North Carolina only to the U.S. South). While the expanded geographic location and lack of focus group did not limit the nature of the study, several limitations should also be considered, such as time, sample size, demographics, the 2020 racial climate, and researcher positionality.

The coding analysis used for this study was the inductive analysis procedure (Bhattacharya, 2017). This type of coding analysis incorporates multiple raw materials, including transcripts, interview notes, and any other notes taken to make sense of the data. Because the study conducted was for a dissertation, time constraints placed limitations on the study. Participants were recruited in 3 days, and all 20 interviews (each participant was interviewed for two one-hour interviews) were conducted over 10 days. The use of an inductive analysis coding procedure allows for an in-depth look at the data collected. This is especially important when thinking of the short timeframe of the study.

Additionally, the study's sample size was small (10 participants), which was appropriate due to its qualitative nature. The coding process and concern for oversaturation of themes within participants' experiences were the deciding factors in keeping the sample size on the smaller side. Of the 10 participants, three came from the same institution, and participants spanned five states. While a larger sample size could risk oversaturation of themes reiterating the need for smaller sample sizes, a larger sample size could provide new data and highlight shared themes between institutional

types, functional areas, states, etc. Regarding new findings, another limitation included the lack of diverse representation across gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Despite being intentional in designing the study and recruiting participants, the majority of the participants self-identified as cisgender straight African American womxn.

Previously mentioned in this study were the constraints around conducting a study during a global pandemic. While the world stopped due to COVID-19, our country came to a second stop in May 2020 with what kicked off a journey of national reckoning with America's history around racism, specifically anti-Blackness and White supremacy with the death of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. In the weeks following George Floyd's public death, the names Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and Oluwatoyin Salau, to name a few on this year's unfortunate #saytheirname list, has frequented many social media pages. Conversations and public statements denouncing racism and, in some cases, specifically naming White supremacy became the norm for Historically White Institutions. Along with statements, virtual town halls, office conversations, and new committees being formed, I wondered about racial battle fatigue on top of Zoom fatigue from many of us working from home for almost 5 months by the time participants were interviewed. The majority of the participants brought up at least one way their university acknowledged the current state of race relations and specifically the university's relationship to the Black community. If we were not in what many have referred to as a "double pandemic," I wonder if participants' responses would have differed or if they would have processed questions differently. Participants' reflexivity

ranged as they answered questions directed towards their positionality concerning their university.

### **Future Research**

As previously stated in this chapter, as well as in Chapters I and II, the literature is minimal regarding the experiences of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at HWIs. While this study focused specifically on southern HWIs as the site of understanding the experiences of mid-level Black womxn, there are several paths in which future research could move. Following this study, future researchers could explore in greater detail the integration of the personal life of mid-level Black womxn in student affairs at HWIs to better understand thriving holistically. Future research could also study a specific area identified within the revised conceptual framework (i.e., onboarding, community, etc.) regarding mid-level Black womxn or Black womxn at other levels within student affairs. The revised conceptual framework is located in Chapter IV.

Additionally, exploring what it means to thrive at HWIs for Black womxn who are either senior administrators or new professionals (years 3-5) would allow for a broader understanding of thriving for Black womxn in student affairs at all three levels. Black womxn student affairs professionals thriving can also be explored by studying different functional areas—i.e., graduate schools, housing, orientation, etc. Thriving can also be studied not only according to the lens of mid-level Black womxn but also other BIPOC professionals (other specific racial and/or gender groups that are also mid-level or more general), including those who work at HWIs or other institution types (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, Tribal Colleges, etc.).

This study explored thriving in the context of southern HWIs; however, future research could involve replicating this study in a different region of the United States. Additionally, future research should look more specifically at the role of class, gender identity, and sexual orientation regarding mid-level Black womxn's experiences. Lastly, future research could explore undergraduate and graduate/professional students' ability to thrive at various institutions. Throughout this section, there are numerous avenues for future research to continue the work of this study.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals thriving at Historically White Institutions can be understood to occur not because of the institutions themselves, but because they were not created for Black womxn despite being built by Black bodies. Mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals can thrive because of their own resilience, resourcefulness, and community support, which often includes the majority if not all Black womxn. The labor mid-level Black womxn must undertake to thrive should not have to be placed solely on their shoulders. Instead, this study aimed to shed light and affirm the experiences of mid-level Black womxn at HWIs and serve as a call to Historically White Institutions. This study calls HWIs to move beyond discussions as they evaluate their role in perpetuating systemic and institutional racism and take actionable steps to address the negative impact HWIs historically and presently have on the mid-level Black womxn student affairs professional's ability to thrive.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

*UNC Greensboro and Duke University current employees are excluded from this study.*

1. Please provide a contact email address.
2. Please provide a pseudonym (first name).
3. Please select the state or district your institution is located:
  - a. Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.
4. Please list your pronouns.
5. Please provide your sexual orientation.
6. Please list your ethnicity.
7. Please select which age group to which you belong.
8. What is your current position title?
9. Please list how many years of experience you have in student affairs.
10. Please check all that apply to your institution type (e.g., mid-size (5,000-10,000), public or private/research or liberal arts)
11. What is your current education level (B.A., master's or Ph.D. or graduate student)?

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Tell me about your professional journey and how your identity as a Black womxn has shaped that?
  - a. What has been your experience as a mid-level professional working at a Historically White Institution?
    - i. Tell me about a day working in your office?
2. What are the most salient identities that come up for you as you navigate your institution?
3. How has your identity as a Black womxn, in addition to other salient identities, influenced the navigation of your institution?
4. Can you talk about the role of identity politics and its impact on your ability to navigate student affairs? Overall institution?
5. Literature talks about how mid-level student affairs professionals are often caught in the middle between new professionals and senior-level administrators. Can you share a time where you felt caught in between?
6. As a mid-level Black womxn, what was it like transitioning as a new employee to your current institution?
  - a. What about transitioning into your current role (if you arrived in a different role)?
7. As a new mid-level, what kind of formal onboarding did you receive that helped you acclimate to your role (institutional level vs. divisional level)?

- a. Describe any type of informal onboarding related to your identity as a Black womxn?
8. What does community look like for you at your institution?
9. How do you go about developing/sustaining those relationships?
10. How does your sense of community impact your ability to navigate your institution?
11. How do you define thriving?
  - a. What does it mean to thrive at your institution as a Black womxn in a mid-level role?
  - b. In what ways do you feel you are thriving, if at all?
  - c. What might help you thrive more?
12. Media Elicitation Activity
  - a. Participants will be asked to come prepared to their interviews with an item that is considered a part of the media (print or digital)—e.g., book, podcast, magazine, blog link, social media page, etc., that has positively impacted them and represents them in their current professional journey and to discuss why they chose their particular work. Participants will also be asked how the item influences their ability to thrive at their institution.
13. Given that I am interested in your experience as a mid-level professional Black womxn working in Student Affairs at a Historically White Institution, is there anything else you want to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **MEDIA ELICITATION ACTIVITY**

Participants will be asked to come prepared to their interviews with an item that is considered a part of the media (print or digital)—e.g., book, podcast, magazine, blog link, social media page, etc., that has positively impacted them and represents them in their current professional journey and to discuss why they chose their particular work.

Participants will also be asked how the item influences their ability to thrive at their institution.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**

This study explores mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals' ability to thrive in Historically White Institutions (HWIs). This study will look at Black womxn's navigation of HWIs and the impact of onboarding (informal/formal) and community on Black womxn's ability to thrive at HWIs. Regarding confidentiality, the identity of the participants will remain confidential, and only I will know the identity of the participants. All participants will be asked to provide a pseudonym of their choosing. Participation in this study means completing a brief online demographic survey and participating in two one-hour interviews, which includes a media elicitation activity. The surveys, recorded interview, transcript data, and notes collected in this study will also be kept confidential in a password protected online repository that is IRB approved.

Additionally, if you agree to participate in this study, I will provide an informed consent form that all participants are required to sign. Participants will also be paid a \$25 Amazon gift card per completed interview (two interviews are requested in total-maximum of \$50 paid). If you have any questions, please let me know at any point before, during, or after the survey and interviews are conducted. Lastly, should you decide to participate in the study, you can remove yourself at any time. For questions, please email [jdadams2@uncg.edu](mailto:jdadams2@uncg.edu). To review the informed consent form, criteria, as well as participate, please click [https://uncg.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_07ipF33b72skej3](https://uncg.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_07ipF33b72skej3).

**APPENDIX E**  
**ELECTRONIC CONSENT FORM**

**Project Title:** \*Tentative Title\* The Experiences of Mid-level Black Womxn Student  
Affairs Professionals Thriving at HWIs

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**Dissertation Chair:** Dr. Laura Gonzalez

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

**What is the study concerning?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purposes of this study are the following:

1. To gain insight into the following research problem or question: This research study explores what thriving looks like for mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at Historically White Institutions. This study specifically looks at

the role of community and informal/formal onboarding that Black women student affairs professionals receive as they navigate their respective institutions.

2. This study is also a component of my doctoral program requirements (dissertation) for the Educational Studies program with a concentration in Higher Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

### **Why are you asking me?**

You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as a Black Womxn (Black is defined as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (United States Census Bureau, 2020).
- Mid-level student affairs professional with at least five years of experience in student affairs
  - Student Affairs is defined as “the work of a professional who fosters student learning, growth, and development through facilitation and support of student success” (Akens et al., 2019, p. 13).
  - Employed at a 4-year Historically White Institution in the following states:
    - Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

### **What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the following:

- Short demographic online survey
- Two one-hour-long virtual interviews which include a media elicitation activity
  - Interview: The interviews will look at how mid-level Black womxn student affairs administrators navigate HWIs, specifically looking at their ability to thrive at their respective institutions. Participants will also be asked about their salient identities, community, and onboarding (informal and formal) and how these factors contribute to their ability to their sense of thriving.
  - Media elicitation activity description: Participants will be asked to come prepared to their interviews with an item that is considered a part of the media (print or digital)—e.g., book, podcast, magazine, blog link, social media page, etc., that has positively impacted them and represents them in their current professional journey and to discuss why they chose their particular work. Participants will also be asked how the item influences their ability to thrive at their institution.

### **Is there any audio/video recording?**

All virtual interviews (includes media elicitation activity) will be audio and/ video recorded as well as transcribed for the purpose of accuracy. I will ask you to provide pseudonyms for the purposes of the transcript. Your real name and institution will not be used at any point for information collection or for this dissertation.



“Because your voice and image will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears or views the recording, your confidentiality for things you say and do the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.”

**What are the risks to me?**

“The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.”

In talking about issues of race and gender in addition to other systems of oppression, especially considering the national climate, it is perceivable that participants may become filled with various emotions during the interview as they reflect on their experiences. We are also in the midst of a global pandemic where socializing with others in person has come to a halt. Therefore, the lack of in-person contact, coupled with the serious nature of the issues this study focuses on, provides a likely risk of emotional distress. However, one would argue that being a person of color, and in this particular case, a Black womxn, is to be in emotional distress quite often.

While I am unable to predict how participants will respond, I have a list of counseling resources shared by UNCG’s counseling office with graduate students that I intend to share with participants should they find themselves in need of additional processing.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

By taking part in this research, the information disclosed may contribute to a body of literature that has a limited amount of information regarding mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals at Historically White Institutions. The goal of this study is not only to increase awareness and knowledge about the experiences of Black womxn student affairs professionals from a particular lens (mid-level) but from a practical standpoint inform the decision-makers at HWIs in creating actionable steps to serve Black womxn staff better.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

As a participant, this study may provide a space to foster community with other mid-level Black womxn student affairs professionals in the previously mentioned states. Additionally, the media elicitation activity completed by participants will be used by the researcher not only as another means of understanding the experiences of participants but also as a means of knowledge production by Black womxn. A database of secondary sources will be cultivated, and this may aid other Black womxn student affairs professionals in addition to the study’s participants in their personal and professional development. Lastly, by participating in this study, participants may find a space where they are affirmed in their various identities, in addition to a sense of catharsis through the interviews and/or focus group.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There is no financial cost associated with the study. All participants will be paid a \$25 Amazon gift card per completed interview—a total of \$50 max. Participants are being requested to participate in two one-hour interviews.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

All information (audio or video recordings, notes, transcripts, and documents) will be kept secure in a UNCG Box folder, which is a password-protected online repository. Participants will also not be identified by name when data is disseminated. The data collected may be used for future studies but will be kept for a maximum of 5 years post-dissertation defense. “All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.”

Internet Research (Demographic Online Survey): “Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.”

**Qualtrics Security Statement:**

“Qualtrics’ most important concern is the protection and reliability of customer data. Our servers are protected by high-end firewall systems, and scans are performed regularly to ensure that any vulnerabilities are quickly found and patched. Application penetration tests are performed annually by an independent third-party. All services have quick failover points and redundant hardware, with backups performed daily.

Access to systems is restricted to specific individuals who have a need-to-know such information and who are bound by confidentiality obligations. Access is monitored and audited for compliance.

Qualtrics uses Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption (also known as HTTPS) for all transmitted data. Surveys may be protected with passwords. Our services are hosted by trusted data centers that are independently audited using the industry-standard SSAE-18 method.”

**Will my de-identified data be used in future studies?**

“Your de-identified data will be kept 5-7 years and may be used for future research without your additional consent.”

**What if I want to leave the study?**

“You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data that has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.”

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

“If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.”

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of this research study and the methods I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me. Please contact either myself (jedadams2@uncg.edu) or my faculty advisor (Dr. Laura Gonzalez, lmgonza2@uncg.edu) with any questions.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project, or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351. By participating in the study-related activities, you agree that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing to consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By participating in the study-related procedures, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study described to you by J’nai Adams.

**APPENDIX F**

**MEDIA ELICITATION RESOURCE TABLE**

Participant	Media Elicitation Item	Author	Item Type	Link (if applicable)
Sasha	<i>The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools: Teaching responsibility; creating caring climates</i>	Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet	Book	
	<i>The Little Book of Restorative Justice for Colleges and Universities</i>	David R. Karp	Book	
	<i>Reframing Campus Conflict</i>	Jennifer Meyer Schrage and Nancy Geist Giancomini, editors	Book	
	<i>The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict (3rd edition)</i>	Christopher W. Moore	Book	
	<i>Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership (5th edition)</i>	Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal	Book	
	<i>Handbook of Restorative Justice</i>	Gerry Johnstone and Daniel W. Van Ness, editors	Book	

Participant	Media Elicitation Item	Author	Item Type	Link (if applicable)
Grace	The Bible	Various authors	Book	
	<i>Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery</i>	bell hooks	Book	
Fatimah	The Pink Robe Chronicles	Dr. Melva Sampson	Digital sermon series	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/pinkrobechronicles">https://www.youtube.com/pinkrobechronicles</a> or <a href="https://www.facebook.com/pinkrobechronicles">https://www.facebook.com/pinkrobechronicles</a>
Sabrina	23rd Psalm	King David	Bible Verse	
Michaela	Photo of the Edmund Pettus Bridge	Photo by Michaela (participant)	Photo	
Sophia	<i>Becoming</i>	Michelle Obama	Book	
Lauren (A)	<i>Draw the Circle: The 40 Day Prayer Challenge</i>	Mark Batterson	Book	
Khadijah	<i>The People Factor: How Building Great Relationships and Ending Bad Ones Unlocks Your God-Given Purpose</i>	Van Moody	Book	
	<i>Belong</i>	Radha Agrawal	Book	
	SA: Voices from the Field	NASPA	Podcast	<a href="https://naspa.org/project/sa-voices-from-the-field">https://naspa.org/project/sa-voices-from-the-field</a>
	Personal Values Inventory	Barrett Value Centre	Assessment	<a href="https://www.valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva">https://www.valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva</a>
	Blk Womyn's Voices in Higher Education	Blk Womyn Voices	Podcast	<a href="https://soundcloud.com.blkwomynvoices">https://soundcloud.com.blkwomynvoices</a>
Lauren (B)	<i>Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower</i>	Brittany Cooper	Book	
	Rants and Randomness	Luvvie Ajayi	Podcast	<a href="https://www.awesomelyluvvie.com/category/poscast">https://www.awesomelyluvvie.com/category/poscast</a>

Participant	Media Elicitation Item	Author	Item Type	Link (if applicable)
Betty	<i>Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand In the Sun and Be Your Own Person</i>	Shonda Rhimes	Book	
Researcher (J'nai)	<i>More Than Enough: Claiming Space for Who You Are (No Matter What They Say)</i>	Elaine Welteroth	Book	